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A Harman/
Kardon Sabre
soundbar



Maximum power!
High-end Artcoustic
speaker system, p26

Stunning LED

Sony 50in is ready to thrill!

Razor-sharp pictures and
revamped Smart system



Cinema's superheroes!

Which comic book icons
deliver the best on Blu-ray?

ON TEST

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Optoma HD30
projector
Roth OLi 5.1
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40/42in TV roundup

Affordable screens
go head-to-head

■ THE HOBBIT 2
■ GRAVITY 3D
■ HOMEFRONT
■ FROZEN ■ THOR:
THE DARK WORLD

Auro-3D

What you need to know
about the new surround
sound format

INSIDE TOSHIBA'S 2014 TV/BD LINEUP → COLLECTING CLASSIC ZOMBIES
→ TOP 10 GEAR GUIDE → READER'S CINEMA → SVS SUBWOOFER → B&W 5.1

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HOME CINEMA Choice

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor Mark Craven
mark.craven@homecinemachoice.com

Deputy Editor Anton van Beek
anton.vanbeek@homecinemachoice.com

Art Editor John Rook

CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Stevenson, Adrian Justins, Steve May, Danny Phillips, John Archer, Tekura Maeva, Ed Selley, Martin Pipe
Photography Mike Prior, Claire Collins

ADVERTISING

Senior Advertising Executive Jo Holmes

Tel: 01689 869 919

E-mail: joanna.holmes@homecinemachoice.com

Sales Executive Dominique Blenman

Tel: 01689 869 899

E-mail: dominique.blenman@homecinemachoice.com

MARKETING AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK: New, Renewals and Enquiries

Tel: 0844 543 8200

E-mail: mytimemedia@subscription.co.uk

USA & CANADA: New, Renewals and Enquiries

(001) 877 363 1310

E-mail: expressmag@expressmag.com

REST OF WORLD: New, Renewals and Enquiries

Tel: +44 (0) 1689 869 896

BACK ISSUES

Tel: 0844 848 8822

From outside UK: +44 (0) 2476 322234

Email: customer.services@myhobbystore.com

www.myhobbystore.co.uk

MANAGEMENT TEAM

Group Editor Paul Miller, paul.miller@avtechmedia.co.uk

Group Sales Manager Duncan Armstrong

Head of Design and Production Julie Miller

Chief Executive Owen Davies

Chairman Peter Harkness

Published by MyTimeMedia Ltd

Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green,

Orpington, Kent, BR6 6BG

Tel: 0844 412 2262

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WELCOME

Auro-3D is the next-gen surround sound format that you may not even have heard – like its rival, Dolby Atmos, commercial cinemas that actually support the system are few and far between. Good news then, that it's making a play at the home cinema market, courtesy of potent processing hardware like Datasat's new LS10 (see p20) and a growing drive from Hollywood studios to releases more titles sporting dizzying Auro-3D mixes.



The audio side of AV is therefore more diverse than ever before. Where once 5.1 setups were the only game

in town, movie fans have plenty of options, from 11-speaker 360-degree immersion at one end of the scale to compact soundbars and soundbases at the other, and various flavours in between. It means whatever your budget or ambition, there should be a solution – and at HCC we're committed to covering them all.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



CONTRIBUTORS



John Archer:
The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Richard Stevenson:
Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal ERT



Steve May:
HCC's former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journo



Martin Pipe:
Technical expert Martin is renowned throughout the home cinema industry



Adam Rayner:
The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and, er, cartoons



Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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Q SERIES



a class above



Whether your preference is music or movies, the KEF Q Series offers a range of options to accommodate your needs. So, whether you're looking for a two channel system or a complete 5.1 or even a 7.2 AV set-up, the highly versatile nine-model line-up will truly satisfy your need for class-leading audio purity.

With the Q Series available in four luxury finishes, there is bound to be a finish which will suit your décor. Choose from Rosewood, European Walnut, Black Oak or Linear White; each choice is finished to the highest standards to complement the clever technology inside.



'For a surround sound experience that delivers true escapism, this package will take some beating.'

Q300 5.1 System, What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision, August 2011

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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** BOWERS & WILKINS 600 Series revamped with six new speakers
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 MGM Legendary studio celebrates its 90th anniversary NEWS X10 The hottest stories in bite-size chunks
 THE WOLF OF WALL STREET Scorsese's award-winning satire heads for BD & DVD AND MUCH MORE!

KEF's slim 'n' sonic

KEF V720W Digital TV Soundbar System → www.kef.com



Hot on the heels of its V300 ultra-slim stereo speakers comes KEF's latest attempt at adding some sonic muscle to your TV. The heart of the £800 V720W system is the slender V700 soundbar, which utilises four 4.5in bass drivers and two 1in aluminium tweeters, driven by an internal Class D amp with switchable EQ modes. This can be connected to your TV via HDMI or optical digital. To bolster bass output the 'bar is accompanied by a V-20W wireless subwoofer with a long-throw 8in driver and 200W amplification.

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

The joy of six

Bowers & Wilkins 600 Series → www.bowers-wilkins.com



Bowers & Wilkins has refreshed its 600 Series lineup with the addition of six new loudspeakers. All combine tried-and-tested B&W technologies (including Kevlar cones) with new solutions engineered especially for the range, such as dual-layer aluminium bass drivers and decoupled tweeters. Pictured here is one of the 600 Series

5.1 arrays suggested by the manufacturer. Dubbed the 683 Theatre, it consists of two 683 floorstanders (£1150/pair), two 686 rears (£350/pair), the HTM61 centre (£550) and the 500W ASW 610XP subwoofer (£700). The latter is one of three subwoofers carried forward from the previous 600 lineup, but with updated cosmetics.

Humax bows 2TB STB



PVR specialist Humax has launched a new

2TB version of its YouView DTR-T1010 set-top box. The extra hard drive capacity bumps recording space up to around 1,200 hours of standard-def video or 500 hours of HD. Otherwise the new box is identical to its 1TB stablemate, including dual tuners and a plethora of catch-up and on-demand services. The DTR-T1010/2TB's £300 price tag has also resulted in price drops for the rest of the range, with the 500GB and 1TB models now priced at £230 and £250 respectively. www.humaxdigital.com/uk

Roku's HDMI dongle



Leading US streaming manufacturer Roku has launched a new

version of its Streaming Stick. Unlike the previous incarnation of the gizmo (which was only compatible with a Roku Ready TV), the new Roku Streaming Stick promises to work with any TV with a HDMI port. Available to order through the Roku website for just £50, the Streaming Stick gives users access to Roku's catalogue of more than 450 channels of entertainment content, including Netflix, Now TV, BBC iPlayer and Spotify. www.roku.com/uk

AVR on a budget



Yamaha has kicked off its 2014 line of AVRs with a new entry-level model.

Priced at £250 the RX-V377 targets budget home cinema buyers with a five-channel design (power quoted at 100W per channel into six ohms) and four-in, one-out HDMI connectivity (with 4K passthrough and ARC on the latter). While it lacks Ethernet and Wi-Fi connectivity, the RX-V377 is compatible with Yamaha's YBA-11 Bluetooth adaptor and features onboard Compressed Music Enhancer tech to buff up MP3 files. uk.yamaha.com

Toshiba targets AV everyman

Brand launches new range of soundbars, BD spinners and HDTVs

Toshiba continues to fly the flag for those on tight budgets or with smallscale aspirations, as evidenced by its new 2014 AV range.

At its recent UK product showcase, the Japanese corp confirmed four new flatscreen ranges – the L74, L64, L54 and 3 series – coming in sizes from 24in to 55in and with price points between £250 and £1,200. None are 4K sets – these will surely follow later in the year and replace the existing L9 screens.

The top-flight L74 range features a trio of 1080p sets – 55in, 47in and 42in – all using Direct LED backlighting and a dual-core engine, and offering the brand's Smart TV Cloud platform and passive 3D. Toshiba claims the new screens improve brightness

by 75 per cent over their 2013 predecessors, and deliver an improved colour performance, via the new backlight system and the



chipset restoration feature of its CEVO Picture suite: 'Using the chipset restoration technology, CEVO Picture is able to take compressed broadcast images and return them back to their intended state by restoring colour and brightness,' it says.

CEVO branches out

Toshiba is also using its long-running CEVO name to highlight new audio tech on the L74 models. CEVO Audio enables users to manage background noise and dialogue separately, tailoring the screen's 2 x 15W speaker output to taste, and aims to improve bass response between 100Hz and 150Hz. Meanwhile, its Smart TV Cloud service is also 'freshened up'. Described as 'more personal' and 'more intelligent', it incorporates MediaGuide Replay, a recommendation engine that factors in viewing and recording habits to suggest content. It will also automatically record such content (as long as a USB drive is connected) while the TV is in standby.

The L64 models (47in and 42in) retain the Smart functionality and dual-core engine, but ditch 3D playback and offer a less-potent AMR+200 motion system. Below this, the L54 series (48in/40in) bring stereoscopy back in the form of an Active 3D system, but with fewer connective options. The entry-level 3 series range is split into L3, W3 and D3 models. The latter two feature 1,366 x 768 resolution, and the D3s (24in, 32in and 40in) offer a built-in DVD player.

Complementing the new screens are three soundbars, including the Bluetooth-equipped Mini 3D Sound Bar II, and three Blu-ray players.

Of the disc spinners, the flagship BDX5500 offers 4K upscaling, Smart TV access and Wi-Fi (with Miracast), and will retail for £120.

PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Yonderland: Series One (R2 DVD)

The writers and stars of the CBBC smash *Horrible Histories* deliver a *Python*-esque parody of the fantasy genre with this insanely inventive and funny series.



Escape Plan (Region B BD)



An enjoyably daft thriller made even more fun by Stallone and Schwarzenegger's chemistry. It also looks and sounds superb on Blu-ray.

Dollman (All-region BD)



Tim Thomerson plays a tiny space cop in this cult 1991 sci-fi flick. Now all we need is a Blu-ray version of *Dollman vs Demonic Toys*...

Lost Girl: Season Three (R2 DVD)



Bo and the gang are back as the best season to date of our favourite supernatural series hits DVD.

Don Jon (All-region BD)



Joseph Gordon-Levitt's directorial debut provides plenty of laughs and looks suitably slick in hi-def.

The BDX5500 (right) sports a stylish, compact design



EXTRAS...

Small items that make a big impression...

RoboCup



Want to show off your unbridled love of '80s sci-fi classic *RoboCop*? Then

you'll want to get your hands on this nifty ceramic mug. Order one now from www.firebox.com – you have 30 seconds to comply!

Grimm: Below the Surface



Combining in-depth interviews with the cast and crew, exclusive production art and an episode guide for the first two seasons, this book is a must for fans of the show.

Marvel Morphsuits



Morphsuits and Marvel have teamed up to create skin-tight full-body suits in the style of five classic superheroes. Better still, each use Augmented Reality to bring their powers to life on mobile devices.

300: Rise of an Empire: The Art of the Film



Every bit as stunning as you'd expect, this lavishly illustrated

hardback is packed with spectacular photography and concept art.

Sony bets on live 4K horse

Live-to-cinema broadcast heralds the 'democratisation of culture'

Ultra High Definition has reached out from Hollywood to London's theatreland, with the first ever 4K live-to-cinema broadcast. The experimental transmission of the National Theatre production of *War Horse* was orchestrated by Sony's professional cinema division, providing a select audience of cinemagoers with a live experience unlike any other.

David McIntosh, Director of Digital Cinema for Sony's Professional Solutions group, told *HCC*: 'This has never been attempted before, the event was shot live using six Sony F55 Super CineAlta 4K cameras, then uplinked to satellite and down to London's Curzon Chelsea cinema in 4K.' While live-to-cinema events are not new, this is the first time it's been done in 2,160p.

For the National Theatre, NEP Visions (the broadcast and infrastructure team responsible) and Creative Broadcast Solutions (the technical producer for NT Live), the production proved a resounding success. Multiple rehearsals and collaborative debriefs delivered a compelling hybrid of live theatre and cinema. Moving from HD to 4K transmissions isn't just about upgrading hardware, though. 'There may be no difference in production values between doing a show live in HD and 4K, but there are creative differences – on those wide establishing shots you linger longer to enhance the 4K experience,' explains Chris Bretnall from CBS.

The presentation was shot at 50fps and delivered as a 4K DCP (Digital Cinema Package). Now in the can, the plan is to roll it out globally for one-off engagements. 'There's a



David McIntosh: 'The live to cinema experience is much more immersive in 4K, you can really feel like you're there'.

real desire to push forward with this kind of "event cinema". It allows theatre owners to target different markets, be it for dramas like *War Horse* or opera, ballet or sport. A lot of cinemas actually have blank time, so from an exhibitor point of view anything that helps widen their market is an excellent step forward.' After that, an appearance on fledgling 4K TV channels or packaged media would seem likely.

On with the show

In many ways, *War Horse* is also a dry run for this Summer's World Cup. 'We're looking to do the same with a selection of World Cup matches, delivering them live into 4K cinemas as well,' says McIntosh.

The implications for future live events are huge, he muses. 'This is all about the democratisation and accessibility of culture and content. You couldn't get a ticket for The Rolling Stones for love nor money, but if we'd have had the ability to take that into cinemas live in 4K, it would have opened it up to everyone.'

McIntosh says the 4K revolution has now grown beyond movies and TV.

'There are already over 16,000 digital 4K cinema projectors worldwide, so we now have plenty of opportunity to focus on it as a different medium, creating a more immersive experience for everyone.'



War Horse gallops into the Curzon Chelsea cinema in 4K

Krell unleashes high-end amps

iBias tech marries musicality with improved energy efficiency

American audio savant Krell has announced a seven-strong range of new amps that promise to combine the sonic benefits of Class A amplification with improved energy efficiency through the use of patent-pending proprietary iBias technology.

'Class A amplifiers have always been the preferred choice of audiophiles... but concerns about energy consumption have reduced some of the enthusiasm,' says Krell chief Bill McKriegan. To counter this, the company claims its new iBias design 'continuously measures current flow through the amplifier's output transistors, and instantly adjusts the power going to the transistors to suit the demands'. Because of this,

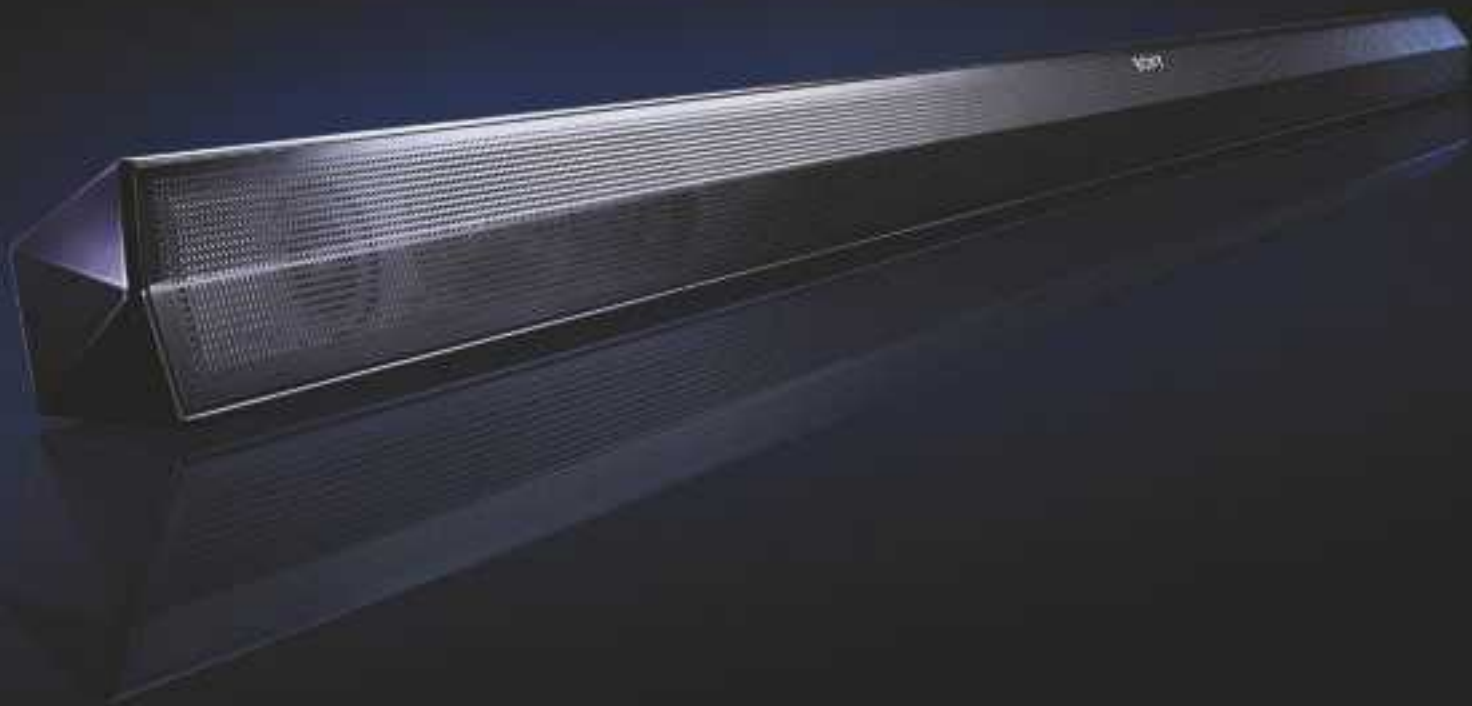
little power is wasted as heat – and as it runs cooler Krell has been able to build it into a more compact chassis design.

The line-up consists of the Duo 175 (£7,500) and Duo 300 (£9,500) stereo amps, Solo 375 (£8,750) and Solo 575 (£11,250) monoblocks, the Trio 300 (£11,500) three-channel amp, the Chorus 5 (£7,500) five-channel amp and the Chorus 7 (£9,500) seven-channel amp. www.absolutesounds.com



All the new Krell amps use the same chassis design, here modelled by the Solo 375 monoblock

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www.sony.co.uk/soundbar

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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ APRIL

04: Noah

Darren Aronofsky directs Russell Crowe in this Biblical epic that hits UK cinemas just in time for Easter. Will box offices be flooded with ticket sales? Only time will tell... www.paramountpictures.co.uk

07: The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug 3D

The second part of Peter Jackson's cinematic retelling of *The Hobbit* hits DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray in the UK. An *Extended Edition* with more extras will follow towards the end of the year. www.warnerbros.co.uk

09: The Gadget Show Live

The popular TV show pitches up at the Birmingham NEC for this five-day event. Alongside the usual cutting-edge tech from around the world, this year's show also promises an increased focus on homegrown talent with the launch of the British Inventor's Project. www.gadgetshowlive.net

11: The Raid 2

Welsh director Gareth Evans gave the action genre a much-needed shot of adrenaline with his 2012 smash *The Raid*. You can understand why we're excited to see the sequel hitting UK cinemas so soon! www.entertainmentone.co.uk

18: The Amazing Spider-Man 2



Expect plenty of superhero spectacle in your local multiplex as Peter Parker dons the skin-tight costume once again to pit his wits against The Rhino, Electro and the Green Goblin in Marc Webb's blockbuster sequel. www.sonypictures.co.uk

28: Nymph()maniac: Vol. 1 and 2



Controversy-magnet Lars von Trier got plenty of people rather hot and bothered with his two-part, four-hour drama about a woman's erotic journey. Find out what all the fuss was about as it hits DVD and BD. www.artificial-eye.com

→ MAY

01: HCC #234

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

MGM: A true cinema epic

As it celebrates its 90th anniversary, we caught up with MGM Chairman **Gary Barber** to talk about the history of this iconic Hollywood studio



The story of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is worthy of its own epic Hollywood film. What does the 90-year history of this filmic institution mean to you?

'It's a great legacy for me personally. When I was a little kid growing up, I used to come to the movies and we'd see that roaring lion. That was symbolic and synonymous of Hollywood and great movies.

'Whenever that lion comes on and roars, it's just that majestic feeling of something great is going to happen. And to be representing MGM today is an unbelievable honour. I do it with great humility and I'm just thankful that I've had this opportunity.'

On the subject of the studio's iconic logo, how important is Leo the Lion to MGM's legacy?

'The lion is the King of the Jungle! I'm actually from South Africa, and it's just such a majestic animal. I think it represents that MGM is back to being a majestic studio, somebody that puts out great cinematic fare. And we look forward to increasing our investment in this content and preserving the great legacy and culture that we've established over the last 90 years.'

How do you think MGM's past helped it evolve into the future?

'There is a rich history there and there's a rich library of intellectual property, so that we can go back into their trove and maybe pick out some jewels.

'We just remade *RoboCop* and we're very excited about that. *The Magnificent Seven* is also one of those iconic properties we're looking to remake. And we also made *Poltergeist*. So we have a rich



library but we're also looking to create new content and new franchises. *Hercules* is coming out this Summer. We have high hopes that that could be one of our new franchises.'

Sylvester Stallone is 'symbolic of what MGM is all about', apparently

What stands out as your favourite MGM film and why?

'It's hard to pick a favourite because there are so many of our movies that are representative of cinematic enjoyment for me. There are a lot of them that I remember but *Rocky* with Sylvester Stallone is one of the all-time favourites.

'In many ways Stallone is symbolic of what MGM is. He's got resilience, great stamina. This guy has withstood the test of time. And he's just got a lot of power and love in him. So it's an honour to have him as part of our family.

'Then there's the Bond franchise. We all grew up with Bond from *Dr. No* in 1962. I can remember going to the cinema to watch that film. It's just one of those iconic properties and now to be a part of releasing *Skyfall*, which became the biggest Bond of all time – it was just that unbelievable evolution from those early days to today. I have to pinch myself to believe it's really happening.'

As part of its 90th anniversary celebrations, MGM has undertaken new 4K restorations of a selection of its movies including *RoboCop*, *Rocky*, *Rain Man*, *Fargo* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Can that be taken as a reflection of MGM's commitment to preserving and honouring its classic films?

'That is our goal – we think they deserve that. When you look at our library, we have 14 Best Picture and 175 Academy Award winners. We have a rich and vast library of great jewels in there. And I think they deserve to be restored on 4K and be shown to a whole new generation of audiences.'



MGM's new 4K restorations are available on Blu-ray through its partnership with 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



Game of Thrones: you love it!

1 Record-breaking disc sales
It's been a superb start to the year for physical media sales in Blighty. The third season of *Game of Thrones* exceeded all expectations as it became the fastest-selling TV boxset in a decade – not bad for the most pirated show in the world and one that has already been available to stream for months via services like Blinkbox and Sky Go. Then, just one week later, the sci-fi smash *Gravity* (reviewed on p98) scored the highest-ever day one sales for a 3D Blu-ray. Who says physical media is on its last legs?

2 Console wars
Sony has revealed that its PlayStation 4 console has sold in excess of six million units worldwide since its launch in November. Meanwhile, Microsoft's Xbox One has only managed to generate sales of about half that number. Presumably acting in response to the disappointing sales figures, Microsoft recently cut the price of the Xbox One in the UK to £400.

3 Retail merger on the cards?
Carphone Warehouse and Dixons Retail may be about to join forces after they released a joint statement to the London Stock Exchange. The statement confirmed that the pair are in 'preliminary discussions regarding a possible merger' but also made it clear that there was 'no certainty' that a deal would take place.

4 Nation of telly addicts
New figures from Barb (the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board) claim that the average UK viewers watched just shy of four hours of telly a day in 2013, with 98.5 per cent of that done using a TV. It therefore looks like we've some way to go before the traditional television is replaced by computers or mobile devices as the primary method of consuming shows on these shores.

5 Ripper resurrected via VOD
Cancelled BBC crime series *Ripper Street* has been saved by Amazon, with the company commissioning a third series of the show for its Prime Instant Video video-on-demand service.

6 Charity scheme continues
AV charity scheme Together for Cinema has completed a new install at Chestnut Tree House children's hospice in West Sussex. 'The new installation will mean that many more children and families can enjoy the simple pleasure of watching a film together, without having to worry about transport and access for their poorly child, while still having full medical support close at hand,' said Sarah Arnold, the hospice's Corporate Fundraising Manager.

7 Arrow hires restoration guru
Arrow Films has appointed James White as its Head of Technical and Restoration. Working as a freelancer for the past three years, White has overseen a number of high-profile restorations for the likes of Arrow and Eureka! Masters of Cinema, including *Time Bandits* and *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Arrow now plans to offer supervised restoration to other companies working on their own projects.

8 Wolf... wows cinemagoers
Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (see p14) has topped *Hannibal* to become the highest-grossing 18-rated film ever in the UK, pulling in £21.8million at the box office.

9 Onkyo uses its Imagination
Onkyo and Imagination Technologies (the parent company of Pure) have entered into an agreement to collaborate on next-gen wireless audio systems. As part of the deal Onkyo has licenced Imagination's Caskeid audio streaming synchronisation tech, as used in Pure's Jongo range of wireless speakers.

10 BBC refreshes iPlayer
The BBC has launched a new version of its iPlayer catch-up service boasting an image-led design that should deliver an optimised and more consistent experience across a range of devices. The new-look iPlayer is rolling out on Smart TVs and online first, with tablet and smartphone apps to follow. The BBC also confirmed that it has started commissioning dedicated iPlayer content including comedy shorts and original drama.



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Jurassic cast announced

Vincent D'Onofrio and Irrfan Khan will be joining Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard in the upcoming *Jurassic World*. To be honest though, we're more interested in finding out which dinosaurs will be in the film!

I'll be back, yet again...



Shooting on *Terminator: Genesis* is expected to begin towards the end of the month according to Arnold Schwarzenegger. It's believed that the top-secret plot for the film is a *Star Trek*-style reboot for the series focusing on the Future War, with two Terminators interfering in the events of the original films, resulting in the creation of a new timeline.

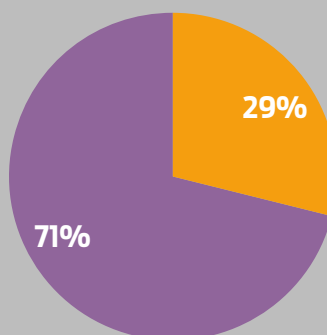
Bird-brained remake

It's been so long since Platinum Dunes announced its intention to remake *The Birds* that we'd thought the project was as dead as a dodo. We were wrong, as the company recently signed Dutch director Diederik Van Rooijen to helm the so-called 're-imagining'.

WE ASKED...

Have you had your home cinema setup calibrated professionally?

Yes
No



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Money talks...

The Wolf of Wall Street → Universal Pictures → All-region BD/R2 DVD

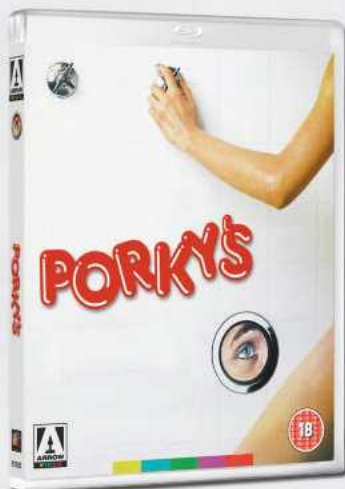
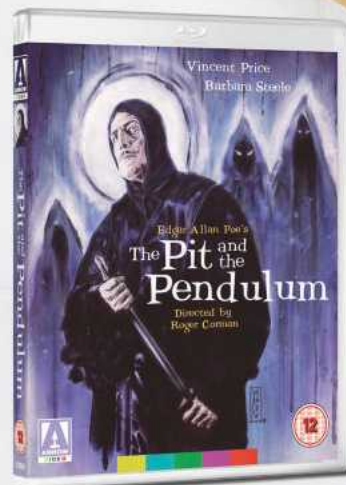
Universal Pictures has confirmed that it is bringing *The Wolf of Wall Street*, acclaimed director Martin Scorsese's scabrous tale of greed and depravity in 1980s New York, to BD on May 19. Based on a true story, this black comedy stars Leonardo DiCaprio as stockbroker Jordan Belfort, whose talent for manipulating stocks saw him earn around

\$1,000,000 a week and attract the attention of the FBI. Blu-ray extras will be limited to a pair of short behind-the-scenes featurettes and a roundtable discussion with members of the cast and crew – but as the film itself clocks in at an epic three hours, there probably wasn't much room on the platter for anything else.





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Bob Clark's classic teen sex comedy *Porky's* arrives on Blu-ray for the first time in the UK, whilst *The Pit and The Pendulum* brings together horror legends Vincent Price and Barbara Steele in a tale of terror and torture. Keeping up the blood and guts quotient is gory 80s creature feature *The Beast Within*, and Academy Award and Palme d'Or winning filmmaker Elio Petri's debut feature *L'Assassino* finally makes it to home video on Dual Format Blu-ray and DVD.

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Sound & Vision: Bristol Show 2014



For those after stunning cinema demos, exotic hi-fi gear and hefty discounts on hardware, the Bristol Show is an essential day out. **Team HCC** reports on this year's AV expo

NOW IN ITS 24th year, the annual Sound & Vision: Bristol Show is a key date in the UK home entertainment calendar, and while it's certainly first and foremost a destination for hi-fi-hedz, home cinema is a growing presence.

Held at the Marriot hotel in Bristol, the show sprawls over six floors, with exhibitors ranging from AV furniture and cable brands to major names including Sony, JVC, Yamaha and Pioneer. Prowling its halls is a thrilling, if rather disjointed, experience – you can move from a sedate two-channel presentation of classical music into a no-holds-barred subwoofer face-off in the blink of an eye. But which companies, and products, really caught our attention? Read on....

24-bit, 384kHz PCM files. To help strut their stuff, this lab-coated trio was partnered with tall, articulate Amphon loudspeakers.

ANTHEM AVS

Anyone at the show hankering for a full-fat home cinema demonstration simply had to check out Anthem AVS' blacked-out room. Running a combination of high-end Paradigm speakers (including the SUB1 woofer), SIM2 projection and Anthem's MRX-710 receiver, it delivered largescale, beautifully-steered multichannel sonics. Knowing that the best way to impress showgoers is to crank it up loud, Anthem AVS' rep, Tom Garrett, favoured *Pacific Rim* and *Man of Steel* as test material, with the latter's Smallville fight sequence proving particularly impressive. Garrett revealed to us that a number of visitors were people who already had the MRX-710 on pre-order and just wanted to be reminded of its power.

ASTELL & KERN

Hi-res audio fans, eagerly awaiting the arrival of HDTracks in the UK (slated for an April launch) were treated to the UK unveiling of A&K's new flagship portable player, the AK240. Your bank manager may demur at the £2,000 required to purchase this piece of portable hardware but how else can you carry around dual DACs, native DSD playback and a balanced output? Stephan Orphanides from UK distributor Computers Unlimited assured *HCC* that

The LV33 active speaker from Audio Pro works with its Living Hub wireless streamer

ANTELOPE AUDIO

Making its Bristol Show debut was Antelope Audio. The company, better known for its pro sound hardware, unveiled the Zodiac Platinum suite, a diminutive audiophile trio comprising the Zodiac Platinum DSD256 upsampling DAC, Volitkus PSU and separate 10M atomic clock.

The latter, named the Baby 10M, is a futuristic gizmo that plugs directly into the Platinum DAC and boasts an accuracy of 0.03 parts-per-billion. This is re-clocking precision taken to insane heights.

System design and build quality is little short of magnificent. The DAC/headphone amplifier offers a 256x DSD upsampling mode and has a custom-built USB chip capable of carrying DSD128 and





**Top: JL Audio's E-Sub e110 subwoofer
Above: The LED-based Optoma HD91**

Q Acoustics' new Concept 40 floorstanding speakers – all we need now is a matching centre channel!

the AK240's 256GB memory can store about 2,500 tracks at 24-bit/96kHz (each approx four minutes long, 90MB). Ten units were on display, half of which were hooked up to high-end balanced input headphones. The player itself is a rather chunky piece of kit, but any doubts we had about carrying a second device around (as well as a smartphone) were soon dispelled by the clarity of Jacko singing *Thriller*, which was simply astonishing – Vincent Price's chilling laugh proved more scary even than the AK240's price tag.

AUDIO PRO

Multiroom audio is the name of the game, according to the speaker manufacturer from the same country that gave us ABBA. Audio Pro is aiming for a leather-clad slice of the Sonos pie and demo'd a range of kit from its burgeoning Living wireless audio ecosystem, including the Living LVHUB, which can stream CD-quality sound to any of its Living range of speakers. It's priced at £250 but ups the ante on Sonos's Bridge by offering digital optical and analogue inputs. New compatible speakers on show included the eye-catching LV33 floorstander, finished in black or white leather and with a price tag of £1,300 a pair. For an extra £450 you could add the slim-line Living LVSUB subwoofer, which comes in the same leather options and boasts wireless and wired inputs, a 200W Class D amplifier, 8in long-throw bass driver and DSP control.

DYNAUDIO

The Danish loudspeaker brand once again grabbed a prime spot on the ground floor, with a room that had enough space to give its imposing Confidence 4 Platinum floorstanding speakers (£17,600 a pair)



Cable manufacturers, such as the Chord Company, are a heavy presence at the Bristol Show

Astell & Kern's AK240 hi-res music player can store around 2,500 24-bit/96kHz tracks



a chance to shine. The resolutely two-channel demo sounded effortlessly refined – more importantly, Dynaudio's product manager Roland Hoffman revealed the existence of a Confidence Platinum centre channel speaker, meaning a high-end cinema array is a possibility. Those with smaller budgets/aspirations should turn their attention to the new Excite range, which lurked in the corner.

JL AUDIO

2014 saw American sub-bass specialist JL Audio make its second visit to the Marriot, this time with its new E-Sub range plumbed into the .1 channel. Two woofers are offered: the 10in, 1,200W e110 (£1,750) and the 12in, 1,500W e112 (2,050). Both feature the brand's eye-catching long-excursion drivers and showcased an ability to reach suitably low. We would have preferred them to have been cranked up a notch, though, as we know the brand's woofers are capable of sounding more epic than they did here.

HCC was also pleased to discover that the legendary Gotham g213 sub (which features twin 13in drivers and a 3,800W power plant) may yet be coming to the UK. It currently falls foul of European Commission regulations on standby power consumption (which needs to be less than 0.5W), but JL Audio is working on a solution, we're told.

JVC

While the Japanese projector whiz had nothing new to show over the weekend, its pop-up cinema room will have given many people their first sight of its DLA-X500R weaving its bigscreen magic. AV fans queued patiently for a demo slot, and were rewarded with the technologically curious (but stunningly cinematic) sight of native 4K material being down-rezzed to 1080p and then upscaled via the brand's e-shift 3 pixel-pushing wizardry.

NAIM

Arguably the most eagerly anticipated launch at the Bristol show was the gloriously over-engineered Statement amplification system from Naim Audio. Comprising the NAC S1 preamplifier and two NAP S1 monoblocks, the package was tethered to a pair of towering Focal Grand Utopia speakers. With jet black livery and 750W per-channel on tap, attendees could have anticipated a baptism of high-volume rock from this labour of love. Instead, perhaps to confound such expectations, Naim instead chose to play choral music and jazzy noodles at altogether more temperate levels. While crisp and clean, it was, to be honest, all rather underwhelming. When quizzed, Naim suggested that this 'was what they like to listen to in China' – clearly indicating just where it sees the bulk of sales coming from.

OPTOMA

A fascinating new contender in the hotly contested high-end home cinema projector market, the HD91 is Optoma's first DLP LED model, and it's a doozy. With Instant On, minimal heat generation and an indefatigable light source (Optoma suggests it'll run >



Above: Yamaha's well-stocked room featured a mixture of hi-fi and home cinema hardware

Right: Sony's HAP-Z1ES hi-res HDD player also includes an integrated upsampler to improve MP3s



undiminished for 10,000 hours, so no need to budget for lamp replacements), this £3K newcomer has a lot going for it. Interestingly, while specified with a light output of just 1,000 Lumens, the image actually looks a lot brighter. The HD91 even managed to cope well with ambient light in Optoma's hotel demo room. In full flight, the new projector is cinematically sharp, the Tom Hanks thriller *Captain Phillips* bristling with detail and vibrant colours. If there is a criticism, it doesn't appear to deliver ocean-deep blacks.

PIONEER

For the first time we can remember, Pioneer's demo suite wasn't employing one of the company's Kuro plasma panels to handle BD images – instead, an Epson projector was on hand. The rest of a very impressive home cinema demo saw KEF's R Series speakers fed by Pioneer's range-topping SC-LX87 receiver, with a choice selection of movie clips given a fair tweak of the volume dial to show exactly what a few grand's worth of AV can get you.

Q ACOUSTICS

Tucked away at the far end of the Marriot's basement, the UK brand had set up a demo of its svelte Concept 40 loudspeaker, which was making its public debut. Selling for £1,000 a pair, the new model is a floorstanding version of the company's Concept 20 bookshelf speaker, with cabinets designed to show no mercy towards colouration caused by resonance – they employ something Q Acoustics calls a Gelcore Construction, which is basically a 'cabinet within a cabinet' with a resonance-cancelling compound applied between the inner and outer shells. Each speaker totes a pair of 6in midbass drivers and a 1in tweeter, and can be bought in either gloss black or white. The setup eschewed a visual element but the two-channel classical music demo sounded dynamic, detailed and clean.

SONY

Unsurprisingly, Sony hitched its High-Res Audio bandwagon up at the Bristol Show, determined to show just how much better remastered classics and modern mixes sound when delivered at 24-

bit/96kHz or above. Taking centre stage were that popular musical duo, the HAP-Z1ES 1TB hard drive music player and matching TA-A1ES integrated stereo amp. Both retail for around £2,000 but compete in sonic refinement with more esoteric brands costing considerably more. While it can't stream across a network, the HDD player does sync its contents with a networked PC running the appropriate client software. File support is wide, with demo tracks played in FLAC, DSD and MP3; the latter benefits from an integrated upsampler which does a surprisingly good job of smoothing over the paucity of bits.

TANNOY

The Brit speaker brand had two areas bearing its name at Bristol 2014. One was a stand showcasing its range of high-end stereo speakers – yet not actually wired in to anything (something we're told is known as a 'static demo'). Thankfully, it had a separate suite featuring its new Kensington Gold Reference speakers. Part of the wider Prestige lineup, the Kensington duo retails for £10,000 (there are bigger, more expensive models in the Prestige stable), and utilises Tannoy's long-running Dual Concentric driver technology, plus cryogenically treated crossover networks. The wood/gold trim styling may hark back to musty lounges of the 1940s, but demonstrations showed the Kensingtons to be up to modern standards, with a great bass weight and room-filling delivery. Tracks from Muse and Mary J. Blige sounded sublime, although our own CD copy of Machine Head proved that the heavy metal industry still has a lot to learn about recording and mastering in high-quality...

YAMAHA

With a business model that seems to cover everything hi-fi and home cinema related, Yamaha's room was a madcap mixture of audio docks, soundbars, floorstanding speakers and AV receivers (where the brand now claims the biggest share of the UK market). There were two demos doing battle against each other. Naturally, the system mixing Suavo speakers with Yamaha's high-end AV separates was more alluring than its soundbar showcase, especially as the company was using *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*' legendary forest battle sequence to illustrate the setup's razor-sharp clarity. Rumour is that one show punter strolled in, had a listen and walked away with a wallet £11,000 lighter ■





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Auro-3D

The newest sound format in town

Surround sound is about to reach new heights, literally, with the launch of Auro-3D. But do we really need 10.1? **Steve May** quizzes the man responsible



Wilfred van Baelen, founder of Auro Technologies: 'I've been driven to find out what immersive AV means'

IF YOU FEARED that the surge in popularity for soundbars and downsized audio heralded the death of hardcore home cinema, then you're in for a big surprise. The multichannel audio experience that you love so much is about to get more expansive and immersive than ever before.

Next-generation sound format Auro-3D aims to rewrite the rulebook when it comes to high-end home cinema sound. While most AV enthusiasts employ a 5.1 speaker configuration, or 7.1 if they have the inclination and room, Auro-3D ups the ante to 10.1, with a three-layered approach for immersive height effects. Imagine a conventional 5.1 base layer, augmented by a second height layer which positions another four speakers in each corner of the room. The cherry-on-the-top third layer comprises a single so-called Voice of God ceiling speaker. If that sounds a tad too bonkers, Auro-3D can be run in a 9.1 configuration, sans divine top box. Those with large theatres can opt for the full-whack Auro 11.1/13.1 cinema experience (with extra centre surround channels), if they insist.

Speaker enclosure madness? Some may think so, but an Auro-3D soundmix rewards with a sonic experience that coddles the listener in a way that existing multichannel systems just can't manage.

Admittedly you'll be hard pressed to find an Auro-3D equipped cinema in the UK, but the system seems to be finding traction with movie makers. The first film to be mixed in Auro-3D was George Lucas' *Red Tails*, released in 2011. In 2012,

Dreamworks CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg was so enamoured he pledged to release no fewer than 15 movies in the format, beginning with *Rise of the Guardians*. Fast forward to 2014 and 45 titles have been lined up for cinema release, including *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, *Kung-Fu Panda 3* and *The Expendables 3*.

Bringing the format to your movie room

The first Auro-3D home cinema hardware support comes from Datasat Digital Entertainment. In addition to an Auro-3D equipped version of its

'Auro-3D rewards with a sonic experience that coddles the listener in a way existing systems just can't manage'

brain-meltingly brilliant RS20i processor (priced around £19,000), the brand has launched the smaller LS10, priced at £13,000 with Auro-3D. Both processors utilise a slot-in card architecture, which enables them to be sold without Auro-3D but upgraded later if required. Also lined up to produce Auro-3D hardware are premium speaker marque Steinway Lyngdorf, French AV outfit DMS and CAT (California Audio Technologies).



Clearly all these brands operate outside the home entertainment mainstream, but the company says it's also inked deals with three major AV brands that will deliver 100,000 AVRs into the marketplace later this year. While the requirement for a three-layer cake of speakers is really only suitable for new cinema room projects, more manageable solutions including mutant tallboy speakers are being mooted for this potential mass market invasion.

As a listening experience, Auro-3D is undoubtedly extraordinary. The addition of those extra height channels makes dimensional panning a good deal more believable when it comes to sound design. Tall objects (lorries, tractors, elephants, giraffes) can be sonically panned front to back, without scooting improbably overhead. It's a better illusion. The VOG speaker adds hitherto unheard levels of ambience. For those building a home cinema from scratch, or commissioning a custom install, it would seem prudent to at least wire for this extended speaker configuration.

While Auro-3D processing will upmix existing multichannel soundtracks, the format will really only come into its own when native soundtracks are

available. Encouragingly, the company promises that at least seven A-list Blu-ray titles with native Auro-3D mixes will be released later this year. In addition, music titles and games are also on the cards.

Inventing Auro-3D

Auro-3D is the brainchild of Wilfred Van Baelen. He's a man on a mission, with plenty of weird science to back up his message. Van Baelen has absolute confidence that Auro-3D will establish itself alongside rivals Dolby and DTS, not least because he's providing Hollywood with the workflow tools to make it happen. The Auro Technologies founder and CEO has a career-long involvement in movie audio. Van Baelen runs Galaxy Studios in Mol, Belgium, a technology hub offering extensive recording, mixing and post-production facilities. He also heads the film financing group Mollywood.

'If you look at the evolution of sound, every format has been basically built around direct sounds. However, there's a very clear evolution of sound toward natural hearing. It's becoming more immersive. We are now arriving at the final dimension in sound – height.'

>

Red Tails (above) was the first Auro-3D title released in cinemas; The Amazing Spider-Man 2, out this April, is the most recent film to sport the immersive sound format

DATASAT'S LS10 – AURO-3D AT HOME

This consumer-grade AV processor is up to the next-gen task

The Datasat LS10 is the first in what is being described as a luxury range of high-end home theatre components from the pro-cinema sound brand. While its stablemate, the RS20i, is essentially a domesticated version of a pucker cinema decoder, the LS10 has been built from scratch as a consumer product. This should mean it's rather more amenable to integration with other kit and a living room environment.



Two versions of this 13.1-channel processor are available. The £10,000 standard edition, and an Auro-3D enabled version, at £13,000. The LS10 features eight HDMI inputs and two outputs, plus digital/phono audio ins and asynchronous USB support.

However, the LS10 doesn't have the DIRAC Live calibration option of its bigger brother, so you'll have to make do with a 10-band parametric equalizer and extensive bass management control.

No fancy new codecs are being employed to deliver Auro-3D into the home. The system uses ten channels of uncompressed PCM, just as it does in the cinema. Van Baelen doesn't believe yet more codecs are necessary to accommodate Auro-3D, as more bandwidth is becoming available on new media. 'I'm in no doubt that PCM is the most versatile audio format,' he says. 'All the different codecs we've seen recently have just created compatibility issues. The audio on digital cinema DCP is PCM, games companies work with PCM, broadcasters are starting up again with stereo in PCM. High-resolution audio in PCM is gaining popularity.' The trend is clear, he argues.

At the heart of Auro-3D are a slew of technologies with monickers seemingly ripped from a *Futurama* sketch. The Beautifier is an

'The company says it's inked deals with three major brands to deliver 100,000 AVRs into the marketplace this year'

algorithm designed to enhance stereo sources, while Auro-Matic 2D upconverts existing surround formats and everything beneath, into a 10.1/11.1 mix. For headphone users there's an Auro processor which delivers a binaural listening experience with any set of cans.

Taking cues from video

In conversation, Van Baelen uses the 'immersion' buzzword quite a lot. It's driving tomorrow's home entertainment experience, he says. 'High frame rates, high-resolution audio, high-resolution images – NHK believes strongly in 8K, which offers 16 times the resolution of HD. So I've been driven to find out just what immersive AV means.' It's not, he adds, what you might first think.

'I discovered that when I watched higher frame-rate content, or listened to higher sampling rates (up to 384kHz), I felt closer to the subject,' he says. The limiting factor of immersion, he concludes, is defined by the resolution of the human brain. 'The brain is like an iceberg, with only 10 per cent visible above the water.'

During an AV experience, says Van Baelen, 70 per cent of the conscious brain is used to process visual data, leaving 30 per cent for touch, taste (popcorn?), smelling and hearing. 'A good deal of

the hearing experience is actually done at a sub-conscious level,' he concludes. The conscious brain, can process 8-12 items per second, accelerating to 60 items per second in times of danger. 'However the sub-conscious brain can process 12 million items!'

Research reveals that when a human brain is monitored during a movie shown at 24fps, there's extensive brain activity as it needs to interpolate the missing frames, explains Van Baelen. 'However, when we measure the same movie viewed at a higher frame rate, brain activity calms down. Viewers become more relaxed.'

That insight prompted Van Baelen to investigate how many frames per second are required to register zero differences between a real-life experience and recorded images. 'A test of 2,000 people discovered that when video was viewed at between 54 and 56 frames per second additional brain activity dropped to unmeasurable levels. At that point the video experience is much more immersive, it feels as though you are looking through a window at reality.'

'*The Hobbit* at 48fps is a technically better picture than 24fps with less blur, but if you add just 12 frames more it becomes amazing. From a visual point of view it connects you with the action onscreen. There are, of course, other parameters that are important, such as high dynamic range and improved colour gamut, but from an immersive point of view I think the frame rate is more important than resolution.' The ultimate combination, he says, is 4K at 60fps.

Get relaxed, be immersed

The same measuring methodology confirms 3D audio, utilising height, to be the most immersive listening experience, says Van Baelen. 'We see the same thing happening when you go from 5.1/7.1 to Auro-3D. Brain excursion goes down. It's much more relaxing.' There is though, a caveat, he adds. 'There has to be a direct relationship between what you see and the sound. A fantastic audio system paired with a small television doesn't work. The same applies the other way around.'

When asked what makes a great AV experience, the Auro-3D evangelist says it's a combination of factors, from volume to left/right timing differences. 'We're very sensitive to even slight changes in direction in terms of where sound comes from,' he explains. We can hear spatial differences up to 200kHz,' he maintains. 'So Auro-3D is not just about sampling frequency, it's about the spread of acoustic energy. All this is key to a truly immersive AV experience.' ■

SOUND CHOICES

From 5.1 to 11.1, there's a variety of formats out there

Dolby Digital 5.1/DTS 5.1

These 5.1 systems use the default home cinema deployment of five speakers, arranged front left/centre/right with two rears, and one subwoofer. 5.1 codecs are commonly used on DVD movie releases, and by broadcast media.

Dolby Digital Surround EX/DTS-ES

These variants on the classic 5.1 configuration add a rear back channel to the mix, delivered by either one or two rear speakers.

Dolby Pro-Logic IIz

In this variant, front height channels are added to the standard 5.1/7.1 Dolby Digital layout, creating a 9.1 soundfield.

Dolby True HD/DTS HD Master Audio

Rival high-performance sound formats used on Blu-ray releases and able to deliver either 5.1 or 7.1 soundtracks, with the latter adding two stereo centre-back channels.

Audyssey DSX/DTS Neo:X

Post-processing options available on some AVRs, these systems use proprietary algorithms to add extra width (front-left wide and front-right wide) and stereo front-height channels, to standard 5.1/7.1 soundtracks, creating an 11.1 mix.

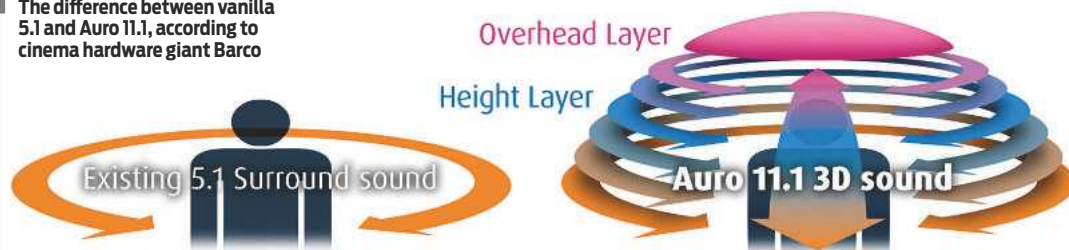
Auro-3D

Home Auro-3D delivers a tiered vertical soundstage that comprises a standard 5.1 base layer, and then a four room-corner second height layer, for an uncompressed 9.1 layout. An optional ceiling speaker can be used to take this to 10.1.

Dolby Atmos

Currently only available in Atmos-equipped cinemas, this offers object- rather than channel-based steering. Dolby Atmos tracks contain positional data which deploys aural effects dynamically, depending on the speaker array available in any theatre.

The difference between vanilla 5.1 and Auro 11.1, according to cinema hardware giant Barco



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HEARING IS BELIEVING

OPPO BDP-105D builds on its predecessor's audiophile reputation by adding DSD 128 (5.6Mhz) support to the USB DAC, and can now also stream DSD 64 (2.8Mhz) over the network.

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Looking for high-end cinema speakers that both sound great and provide discreet installation options? Danish brand Artcoustic can help...

ARTCOUSTIC IS WELL known for its living room-friendly on-wall speakers that can be specified with custom grilles to match your room's décor – indeed, you could argue it's perhaps too well-known for them. There's a temptation to see any company with products that wouldn't look out of place in an interior design mag (especially with a name like Artcoustic) as, well, not a proper home cinema player. Yet that couldn't be further from the truth.

While Artcoustic will happily sell you a stereo pair of wall-hung monitors in a variety of colours, it's equally keen to help you achieve home cinema heaven, via its larger-scale cabinets that are designed to fit behind a projector screen and make light work of the most raucous Blu-ray soundtracks. And it's that sort of array that's on test here.

The company hails from Denmark – counting the likes of DALI and Dynaudio as its neighbours – and began life back in 1998. As a relatively small outfit compared to the big speaker brands, it's still able to boast about all its products being handmade in its native country.

Unusually for a loudspeaker manufacturer, Artcoustic doesn't go down the 'top, middle and bottom' route when it comes to its range – as opposed to, say, Monitor Audio. Every model it offers (from a lineup that's 30+ strong) is, in some regard, the same speaker.

How so? Because Artcoustic employs the same drivers across all its cabinets – dual ring radiator tweeters and 3in midbass units in its speakers, and 10in low-frequency drivers in its passive subwoofers. As you step up through the range, the cabinet size increases and the number of drivers grows.

This approach is designed to ensure the cinema models can hit very high SPLs. Adding more drivers improves the speaker's sensitivity – to a claimed 110dB in the case of the L/C/R models reviewed here – and allowing it to be driven to reference level without requiring a collection of Lake Michigan-sized power amps. This makes speaker/amp matching a simpler process. 'Amplifier power is meaningless without high efficiency,' espouses Artcoustic UK's rep, Paul Cummin.

Assembling the troops

The system tested here is 7.2 (although our photography only includes two of the four surrounds), with the stars of the show being the Spitfire 24-12 SLs. These enclosures are designed for cinema rooms only. They're grille-less and feature a more durable finish than alternative (but technically identically) models offered for

The Artcoustic speakers use a line-array-style driver complement to ensure high sensitivity



Mark Craven's love of explosive multichannel audio means he's now watched the bank robbery scene from *Fast & Furious 5* more than 70 times





rooms where they will be installed on show. Each presents a front baffle jam-packed with drivers. Twenty-four mids and 12 tweeters to be exact, hence the name. The Spitfire lineup also offers two smaller models with fewer drivers – the voice-matching means you can build an array tailored to your room's needs. Artcoustic says the best methodology is to start with screen size and seating position and configure the audio system from there, rather than trying to shoehorn a set speaker package into a space that, acoustically, doesn't need it.

The 24-12s are on front soundstage duty, and in this instance partnered with a quartet of Diablo SL on-wall speakers and a pair of

'The soundstage is both wide and deep, able to involve you unhesitatingly in the onscreen action'

Spitfire subs. The former are less sensitive, but will typically be installed nearer the listening position – more potent Artcoustic surround speakers are offered. The latter are passive designs, ported via a front-facing slot and with twin 10in bass drivers, and fed by separate rack-mountable power amplifiers totting 750W a-piece.

My audition took place at Artcoustic's Chelmsford showroom, in a somewhat lush purpose-built space that the brand uses to show potential buyers exactly what high-roller home cinema is all about. Twin rows of Cine-Italia seating point eagerly at a 170in Screen Excellence

Grille options for the on-wall monitors include stylised 'modern art' designs



Each subwoofer is driven by its own rack-mountable 750W power amp



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projector screen, fitted with Enlightor 4K material to get the optimum image from the newly resident JVC X900R flagship light-cannon. In the rack is an Integra pre/power duo (a DTA-70.1 and a DHC-80.3) priced at approximately £5,000, and a Sony BDP-S790 Blu-ray spinner.

That Enlightor screen material is acoustically transparent; vital as the front soundstage speakers, and dual subwoofers, are mounted behind it.

Controlled aggression

As you'd expect from a speaker array with a price tag nearing the £20,000 barrier, the Artcoustic SLs are highly impressive. That insane quotient of tweeters and midbass drivers does what the manufacturer intends – enable high-volume, home cinema heroics without ever sounding like it's getting out of control.

Detail retrieval and the articulation of movie effects are perhaps the standout performance trait here. With the 2013 science-fiction flick *Oblivion*, this means the environments created by director Joseph Kosinski and his sound team are alive with clean, delicate – but forceful when needed – noises, making this tale of Tom Cruise moping around a desolate Earth as real-sounding as it can. The rain spattering on his craft's windscreen and the crackling lightning of the storm are succinctly delivered, as are his crunching footsteps and the whistling wind as he trudges around the planet's surface.

The soundstage created is both wide and deep, able to involve you unhesitatingly in the onscreen action. For instance, when Cruise drops into the sinkhole, tracking the beeps of the beacon, the Artcoustics help build the tension, conveying the space of the underground library with smooth pans and a pronounced sense of atmosphere. Sounds hang in the room, rather than stumbling forward sheepishly from the screen. This system has a handy knack

of revelling in quiet periods, painting a sonic picture, before bursting into life with shocking dynamism.

This sinkhole sequence features what AV fans will know is a great subwoofer showcase – the descending bass note that illustrates our hero plummeting back underground when his rope snaps. The twin drivers here absolute nail it, maintaining their serious output as the tone drops and drops, exciting the air around you. While it's not up there with the very best subwoofer performance, missing out on that visceral power and size that premium dedicated woofers can offer, it's entirely commensurate with the relatively affordable price point.

'Detail retrieval and the articulation of movie effects are the standout performance trait here'

For a more bombastic sound mix (although not quite as artful) I turned to *Fast & Furious Five* and its dramatic dragging-a-bank-vault-down-the-street sequence. This proved utterly fabulous, especially after nudging the Integra amp up a notch – the Artcoustics seemed to delight in the extra power, finding more punch and scale. Gunshots hit hard and fast, with a spine-tingling impact that's exactly what the AV doctor ordered.

Imaging is excellent. As Vin Diesel and Paul Walker thrash their cars through Rio de Janeiro, these speakers track their throaty engines and the spinning, tumbling vault all around the soundfield without a gap in the delivery – a benefit, surely, of the timbre-matching throughout the Artcoustic lineup. The subwoofers have work to do here, and the way they add tight, fleeting thumps to each collision (and there are many) is first-rate, devoid of overhang.

The opening sequence to *Pacific Rim* continued the fun. I kept the amp running high, and was rewarded with a lively, aural experience, particularly the high-in-the-mix voiceover ('to fight monsters, we created monsters of our own...') and the mid-range weight given to the rousing score. Ramin Jawadi's original composition is a fantastic arrangement of driven guitars and synthetic drums that gradually builds as del Toro moves the pre-credits narrative forward, and the SL lineup had me tapping my foot in appreciation and leaning forward in my seat. And later on, when the largescale action becomes relentless during the attack on Hong Kong, the cracks of falling masonry, screams of terrified residents and pounding Kaiju feet are intensely cinematic and deftly separated.

Dialogue is delivered with believability and verve, and that behind-the-screen placement of the centre channel and L/R speakers really helps locate it to where it's meant to be. Whether it's Idris Elba's stagey shouting in *Pacific Rim*, Andrea Riseborough's headset chatter in *Oblivion* or Billy Connolly's gruff King Fergus in Pixar's *Brave*, the result is natural-sounding voices with presence.

The sound of music

Switching from movies to music gives the SL array a better opportunity to showcase its full-range delivery. Run-throughs of *Jack The Ripper* (Grooverider) and *Swamp Music* (Lynyrd Skynyrd) elicit a wide grin. Hi-hats and other percussive effects bounce along atop a fluid, clean midrange. The guitars and vocals of the '70s rock anthem, and the synths and weird, guttural grunts of the drum 'n' bass track, sound real and are thrust forward in the mix, while delicate sounds, such as fingers sliding along a guitar string, aren't lost in the melee. However, with the Artcoustic speakers very much erring on the side of neutral when it comes to tone (and the fact that being installed on-wall means you can't toe them in, as some music buffs would like to do), it's perhaps not the most

GIVE YOUR SPEAKERS A GOOD GRILLING...

For its on-wall speakers, Artcoustic offers bespoke finishes so you can pimp your system

Generally, loudspeaker finishes are on the conservative side. We typically choose from various wood options (cherry, walnut, etc), gloss black or, for the ultra-fashionable, gloss white. Artcoustic, however, offers a sizable range of finishing options for its on-wall cabinets – although some will cost you extra.

As standard, all of its speakers (except the Spitfire SLs that are designed to sit behind a projector screen) are available with a grille from its Match system, which runs to eight colours – black, white and various blues, greys, creams and browns in between. If you've maxed out on budget, you should



still be able to find something here to suit. Yet for an additional outlay, design-conscious buyers can choose from over 1,000 shades for the cabinet itself (they're either black or white as standard) in silk, gloss or piano finishes, and

customise the grille, too. Here, Artcoustic provides a portfolio of currently around 3,000 images – everything from racing cars to abstract art is offered – or you can supply your own image as long as you own the rights to do so. In other words, you can't have your favourite movie still.

Prices for the custom grilles begin at around £100 each. See the dedicated website www.artcousticshop.co.uk for more info.



The same 1in tweeters and 3in midbass units are used across the Artcoustic range

emotive hi-fi listen at this price point. That said, switching to the Integra's all-channel stereo mode showcased the array's impressive ability to fill a room with power and scale. Equally, you could argue that a custom-built cinema isn't the proper venue for critical music listening.

One for your shortlist

If you're serious about home cinema at the premium level and are planning a projector-based dedicated room, then these need to be on your shortlist. The newly slimmed-down design (the original Spitfire models were nearly twice as deep) will make them easier than ever to install, and Artcoustic's modular approach means the brand, or your installer, should be able to specify the configuration that's most apt for your space (and you therefore may find a more affordable package is relevant).

There are rival systems to consider, of course, but nothing that is an obvious competitor. A Steinway Lyngdorf or JBL Synthesis package (both of which I've heard and loved) will edge this in terms of performance, but will cost you a lot more. Similarly, there are similar-priced setups from more traditional hi-fi brands (B&W, DALI, Quadral...) that have a more musical bent and, perhaps, offer more pride-of-ownership, with their lush cabinet finishes. However, these usually arrive with centre channel enclosures viewable from space, and throw up installation problems of their own. Amp matching becomes a more serious task, too.

What the Artcoustic array offers is therefore highly unusual – potent, room-filling sound with a serious nod to setup and room design. It's no-compromise AV that understands the compromises – and standards required – of a dedicated cinema install ■

SPECIFICATIONS

SPITFIRE 24-12 SL

DRIVE UNITS: 24 x 3in midbass drivers; 12 x 1in dual ring radiator tweeters
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, line-array
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 65Hz-40kHz
SENSITIVITY: 110dB
POWER HANDLING: N/A
DIMENSIONS: 1,126(h) x 350(w) x 67(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15kg

DIABLO SL

DRIVE UNITS: 3 x 3in midbass drivers; 1 x 1in dual ring radiator tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-40kHz
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: N/A
DIMENSIONS: 360(h) x 270(w) x 67(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4.5kg

SPITFIRE SL SUB

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 10in long-throw bass drivers
ENCLOSURE: Slot-ported (front)
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 25Hz-120Hz
ONBOARD POWER: Driven by separate 750W power amp
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 844(h) x 500(w) x 150(d)mm
WEIGHT: 30kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo speaker-level input

HCC VERDICT

Artcoustic Spitfire SL 7.2

→ £17,000 Approx → www.artcoustic.com
 → Tel: 01245 400904

HIGHS: Large-scale surround sound with dynamism and excellent detail; modular ethos improves system flexibility; sensitive design helps amp matching

LOWS: Passive subs means you have to find rack space for separate amps; neutral tone won't suit some hi-fi tastes

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Cinema's greatest

SUPER

With *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *The* of superhero cinema, **Team HCC** picks the best



HEROES

Amazing Spider-Man 2 kicking off another Summer (and worst) bigscreen icons from Marvel, DC *et al* >





'Zack Snyder's faithful adaptation of Watchmen was worth the 23-year wait'



CAPTAIN AMERICA



Origin story:

This shield-toting serum-enhanced patriot first appeared in the 1940s in a series published by Marvel Comics progenitor Timely Comics. In the following 70-odd years, Steve Rogers' alter-ego has been impersonated, frozen in ice, rumoured dead and even become the occasional leader of the Avengers.

On the silver screen:

Cap's debut came in a 15-part serial in 1944, now available on a slipshod R1 DVD that's only of interest to completists, before returning to cinemas in 1990's eponymous box office flop, with Matt Salinger in the lead role. At least this is available on Blu.

Securing Captain America's spot in our lineup therefore is his recent filmic resurgence under the guidance of Marvel Studios as part of its Phase 1 series of blockbusters. 2011's big-budget *Captain America: The First Avenger* re-introduced the character to cinemagoers with a bang; *Avengers Assemble* followed a year later and he's currently rampaging around your multiplex in ...*The Winter Soldier*.

Disc pick: *Captain America: The First Avenger*

Paramount Pictures' region-free UK release sports an impressively potent DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix to match the stylised 1080p visuals, and serves up the bonus *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer* Marvel 'One-Shot'.

RORSCHACH



Origin story:

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* #1 for DC Comics introduced its grownup audience to this costumed vigilante, who – as the graphic novel builds towards its climax – proves to be the only one of his crime-fighting buddies with an unwavering drive to do good, making him our flawed favourite.

On the silver screen:

Moore's award-winning comic is famous for its convoluted journey from page to screen – from 1986 to 2005 it bounced around from Fox, Warner, Universal, Paramount and back to Warner again, only perhaps gaining traction once Christopher Nolan's mature take on Batman (*Batman Begins*) had proven a success. Rorschach has therefore only had one stab at movie stardom (although as DC Comics released a series of prequels in 2012, he could feasibly return). Thankfully, Zack Snyder's adaptation was worth the wait, with the 300 director working with David Hayter and Alex Tse's screenplay to get close enough to the tone of Moore's work to keep *Watchmen* fans on side.

Disc pick: *Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut*

Featuring the 186-minute Director's Cut, plus the *Tales of the Black Freighter* animation and copious extras, this (now deleted) region-free US import remains the definitive disc release.

THOR



Origin story:

Thor made the transformation from a staple of Norse mythology to comic superhero via Marvel Comics, which posited the idea that he'd been dumped on Earth – with no memory of his deific status – by his tetchy father Odin to learn some manners. Of course, it wasn't long before the Thunder God was back to his old self, and teaming up with other Marvel characters to crack skulls.

On the silver screen:

Another new kid on the cinema block, Thor is treading a similar path to his studio stablemate Captain America, first appearing in his own standalone movie (*Thor*, directed by Kenneth Branagh), then *Avengers Assemble*, and then *Thor: The Dark World* (reviewed in this issue on p101). All feature Chris Hemsworth as the hammer-hurling walking muscle, and all are action-packed epics that rarely put a foot wrong. More Thor? We don't mind if you do.

Disc pick: *Thor: The Dark World*

Skip the 3D conversion and enjoy Disney's 2D encode that digs out the detail in the movie's frequent dark sequences. And prepare for some powerful LFE!

HUMAN TORCH



Origin story:

Johnny Storm (aka the Human Torch) is a founder member of Marvel's 'First Family' of superheroes: the Fantastic Four. Inspired by an earlier android character created by Timely Comics, this new Human Torch is the younger brother of Sue Storm (Invisible Woman) and has the ability to control fire – which also gives him the ability to fly. And his flame-based powers are matched by a hot-headed personality.

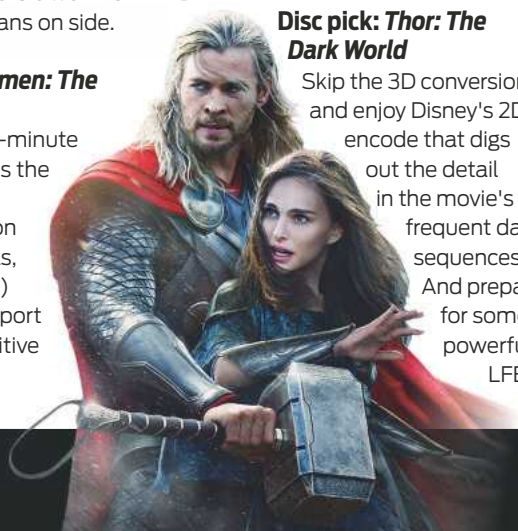
On the silver screen:

Having been absent from the '70s *Fantastic Four* animated TV series (where he was replaced by a robot called H.E.R.B.I.E.), the Human Torch looked ready to make his bigscreen debut in a 1994. However, that *Fantastic Four* film was never released and claims persist that it was only made so the production company could keep hold of the rights to the characters.

Only when 20th Century Fox acquired the rights could the Human Torch have his shot at cinematic stardom. As played by Chris Evans, he was the saving grace of both 2005's lacklustre *Fantastic Four* and its marginally improved 2007 sequel. Michael B. Jordan has since been cast as the character in Fox's 2015 reboot.

Disc pick: *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*

Fox's BD may be getting on a bit, but it still packs a heck of a punch courtesy of A-grade AV and an abundance of bonus goodies.





'Hellboy found a kindred soul of sorts in Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro'

BLADE



Origin story:

Born out of the blaxploitation boom, this vampire hunter first appeared in *The Tomb of Dracula* #10 in July 1973. Armed with teak-bladed knives, a stylish afro and vampiric abilities (thanks to his mother being bitten during his birth), Blade remained a supporting player in the Marvel universe until a teamup with *Ghost Rider* in the 1990s brought him to the attention of a brand-new audience primed to embrace a deadlier breed of hero.

On the silver screen:

You can pretty much thank *Blade* for Hollywood's current love affair with comic book superheroes.

In the wake of 1997's *Batman & Robin* the major studios had almost given up on the genre. But the surprise success of New Line's *Blade* the following year (a return of more than \$130million from a budget of just \$45million) saw the likes of Sony and Fox putting their *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* projects into production.

Sequels followed in 2002 and 2004, but a lawsuit filed against the studio by leading man Wesley Snipes (and his subsequent, unrelated, prison term) all-but killed the series.

Disc pick: *Blade II*

As usual when director Guillermo del Toro is involved, this action-packed sequel looks and sounds superb in HD, and the BD is chock-full of extras.



WOLVERINE



Origin story:

While he made his comic debut in 1974 in an issue of *The Incredible Hulk*, its Wolverine's subsequent involvement with the X-Men that makes him famous with film fans (not least because Marvel Studios doesn't own film rights to the character so the chances of him popping up in its own movies are zero). A mutant Canadian with adamantium claws, he's the maddest and baddest of the X-Men.

On the silver screen:

Despite popping up everywhere in animated fare (including *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* and *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes*), Wolverine didn't claw his way onto cinema screens until Bryan Singer's *X-Men* in 2000. Aussie thesp Hugh Jackman wore the sideburns in this flick that further proved comic book adaptations could make mega-bucks, and he has since appeared as Wolverine five more times (most recently in 2013's superb *Wolverine*) and will return this year in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. All are available on Blu-ray.

Disc pick: *X-Men 2*

This two-disc release from 20th Century Fox takes the best of the ensemble flicks and lavishes it with quality extras and a sharp transfer.

HELLBOY



Origin story:

A relatively new addition to the pantheon of superheroes, this red-skinned demon (with a stone hand and filed-down horns) recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of his debut comic. Summoned as a baby by occult Nazis during WW2, he was discovered by the US Army and eventually found a place in the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense. The comic series still runs under the guidance of creator Mike Mignola.

On the silver screen:

Hellboy found a kindred soul of sorts in Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro. Both 2004's *Hellboy* and 2008's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* saw the blockbuster spectacle audiences expect from superhero flicks sit happily alongside the type of fairy tale and horror subject matter that runs throughout del Toro's films.

Between the two live-action movies, Hellboy also appeared in two animated films – *Sword of Storms* and *Blood and Iron* – for Cartoon Network. They are available on DVD in the UK and Blu-ray in the US.

Disc pick: *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*

A former recipient of HCC's 'Disc of the Year' award, this Blu-ray is still being used as a test platter by our kit reviewers thanks to its reference-quality AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals and immersive, playful DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics.

FILMIC FAILURES

Not all superheroes are cut out for cinematic success

Jonah Hex

The disfigured Civil War-era bounty hunter from DC Comics was given a very weird movie debut by Warner Bros in 2010. Josh Brolin's anti-hero had a new power of communing with the dead, John Malkovich breezed through the bad guy role, and the finished cut (including credits) ran to a mere 81 minutes.

The Phantom



The long-running comic icon has appeared fitfully at cinemas. A 1940s serial spawned another run, but in feature film terms the crime-fighting resident of Skull Cave has been played once, by Billy Zane, in a 1996 movie that lacked the bombast needed to get bums on seats. The *Ghost Who Walks* deserved better.

Green Lantern

Another low for Warner, which debuted the power-ring wearing hero – and potential bigscreen Justice League member – in a 2011 movie that, at times, seemed so heavily played for laughs it could have been a spoof. Fans looking for something stylistically similar to its *Dark Knight* trilogy were disappointed; others shook their heads at its mix of smart CG wizardry and messy plot.





'Spidey's cinema debut didn't come until 2002, following a tangled web of legal disputes'

THE CROW



Origin story:

Death Wish meets the supernatural! This macabre tale of Eric Draven's resurrection (courtesy of a helpful crow) and new life as a vengeance-dealing Goth-tinged anti-hero arrived in 1989 from Caliber Comics. Since then, different characters have all been brought back to life by the avian aide, in order to exact revenge on the hoodlums responsible for their demise.

On the silver screen:

Only five years passed between *The Crow*'s comic and cinematic debuts, with Alex (*I. Robot*) Proyas directing the mid-budget screen adaptation that's probably most famous for being star Brandon Lee's last role (and the fact he was fatally shot on-set). Put that to the back of your mind and enjoy the dark, unsettling tone and well-handled action.

With *The Crow* a huge hit for Miramax, sequels quickly followed: *The Crow: City of Angels* (1996), *The Crow: Salvation* (2000) and *The Crow: Wicked Prayer* (2005). The latter two were straight-to-video – a sensible decision.

Disc pick: *The Crow*

The UK BD release is an MPEG-2 1080i encode, with hideous cover art. Get the 2011 US release if you can.

HULK



Origin story:

Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's monstrous creation first burst onto the scene in May 1962's *The Incredible Hulk* #1. The series only lasted six issues, but Hulk's creators refused to let him die, making him a founding member of the Avengers before relaunching the character in the pages of *Tales to Astonish* #60. By 1968 his popularity was such that the comic was retitled *The Incredible Hulk* and the rest, as they say, is history...

On the silver screen:

Thanks to the iconic TV show it feels like Hulk has rarely been out of the media spotlight in the past few decades – but he didn't hit the big screen until 2003. A reboot followed in 2008, but it was Hulk's scene-stealing turn in *Avengers Assemble* that cemented his place as a superstar.

Pick of the discs: *Avengers Assemble 3D*

A rampaging Hulk adds plenty of weight to this superhero battle royale on BD. Just keep clear of the edited UK disc!



GHOST RIDER



Origin story:

In the early 1970s, biker culture was riding high, and Marvel Comics tapped in on this two-wheel passion by rebooting the concept of the Ghost Rider (previously a Wild West figure on a horse) as an unfortunate stunt-bike rider caught up in a pact with a demon (Mephisto) that sees him become a flame-skulled skeleton. Not the sort to get a Happy Meal tie-in...

On the silver screen:

Ghost Rider has made only two movie appearances (both starring Nicholas Cage) under the wing of Sony Pictures, which purchased the rights from Marvel. Production on the first, directed by *Daredevil* lensman Mark Steven Johnson, wrapped in 2005 but the movie wasn't released until 2007. A reasonable box office hit, Sony saw fit to usher in a sequel five years later, this time with the directing duo Nevelandine/Taylor (*Crank*) ramping up the lunacy levels. Yes, it won two Golden Raspberry Awards, but there's still plenty of fun to be had here. Fans should cherish it, too, as Marvel has now reclaimed film rights, but hasn't yet announced any plans to reboot the franchise.

Disc pick: *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*

It may have been converted to 3D in post-production, but EntertainmentOne's Region B release is a surprisingly engaging slice of stereoscopy – and it sounds flamin' fantastic.

SPIDER-MAN



Origin story:

Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the early 1960s as the arachnid-powered alter-ego of nerdy high school student Peter Parker, Spider-Man has slung his webs practically non-stop in *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic series for over 50 years, squaring up to the likes of Doctor Octopus and the Green Goblin. Superhero royalty.

On the silver screen:

While episodes of the 1970s US TV series were repackaged for theatrical release, Spidey's *bona fide* cinema debut didn't come until 2002, following a typically tangled web of studio wrangling and time-wasting. James Cameron came close to getting a project off the ground in the 1990s, before Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* sent box office tills ringing. Two more Raimi movies proved equally successful financially, yet he pulled out of a fourth in 2010 claiming he couldn't arrive at a script he was happy with. Sony then surprised fans by immediately kickstarting another series (with the different title *The Amazing Spider-Man*) helmed by the aptly-named Marc Webb. Part two is out this month; third and fourth entries are already planned.

Disc pick: *Spider-Man 2 [Mastered in 4K]*

Available to import from the US, Sony's all-region Blu-ray platter employs a higher bitrate transfer, resulting in improved image fidelity on regular Full HD screens, and not just 4K models.



'Of the original series, Superman IV: The Quest for Peace tested the loyalty of fans'

2014: SUPERHERO DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

We pick four big titles hitting cinemas this year

The Amazing Spider-Man 2

Director Marc Webb chooses 35mm film after shooting the series opener on digital, with Jamie Foxx in the supporting cast as villain Electro. Catch it in Dolby Atmos or Auro-3D if you can when it arrives on April 16.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Michael Bay is producing this flick that reboots the high-kicking, adolescent heroes following the previous quadrilogy. Megan Fox leads the human cast. Out Oct 17.

X-Men: Days of Future Past



The seventh entry in the mutant franchise arrives on May 22, with Bryan Singer directing a huge cast that assembles the stars of *X-Men: First Class* as well as the original trilogy.

Guardians of the Galaxy

Is Marvel Studios' taking a risk with this outer space caper featuring Bradley Cooper as a racoon sniper and Vin Diesel as a human/tree hybrid? See for yourself on August 1.

IRON MAN



Origin story:

He may wear a technologically-advanced suit of armour, but Tony Stark's flaws are all too human. Rather than supervillains, this billionaire industrialist-turned-superhero's most memorable comic book battles have come about through alcoholism and ideological differences with fellow Avengers leader Captain America.

On the silver screen:

Until recently you'd have been hard-pressed to find anybody who wasn't already a comic book fan who had any idea who Iron Man was. But that all changed in 2008 with the release of Marvel Studios' debut feature film. Having won over audiences around the world (thanks largely to charismatic star Robert Downey, Jr.) Iron Man's bigscreen profile went from zero-to-hero overnight. Since then he has become a lynchpin in Marvel's cinematic universe, appearing in two direct sequels, plus *Avengers Assemble* and its forthcoming follow-up.

Disc pick: Iron Man: Ultimate 2-Disc Edition

Iron Man's first movie remains his best and Paramount's original two-disc Blu-ray release is definitely the version to own. Not content with wow-ing you with its top-tier AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and aggressive Dolby TrueHD 5.1 soundtrack, it also impresses with the care and attention that was put into creating its vast array of supplementary goodies.

SUPERMAN



Origin story:

DC Comics has fiddled around with Supe's origins frequently over the years, but all you need to know is that this alien from Krypton crashed to Earth, found he had super-powers, and spends his time in Metropolis fighting the forces of evil while moonlighting as bumbling journalist Clark Kent.

On the silver screen:

Superman has made many trips to the multiplex, beginning with two serials with Kirk Alyn in the title role (available on R1 DVD) before George Reeves donned the 'S' for the 1952 flick *Superman* and *The Mole Men*. The 1970s then saw *Superman: The Movie*, Richard Donner's big-budget outing starring Christopher Reeve (the four-disc Collector's Edition BD of this offers ...*The Mole Men* as a bonus feature). Three sequels followed, the last of which – *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace* – is a test of any fan's loyalty.

Unsurprisingly, Hollywood rebooted the character for a new generation of cinemagoers with *Superman Returns*. When this proved to be a bit limp, another reboot, the far better *Man of Steel*, was quickly set in motion.

Disc pick: Man of Steel

Probably not the best Superman film, but if you're looking for a lossless audio mix that will push your speakers to their limits then this franchise reboot can't be topped.

BATMAN



Origin story:

It's been repeated in comics and films so many times over the past 75 years that it's hard to believe that anybody doesn't know the origin of this vigilante hero. Just to be on the safe side, Batman is really billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne, who witnessed the murder of his parents as a child and grew up swearing revenge on criminals.

On the silver screen:

Batman's relationship with movies is almost as long and convoluted as that with the printed page. As with Superman, his first taste of the success came with a pair of movie serials (both available on R1 DVD). More fame followed in the 1960s with the legendary TV series starring Adam West as the 'Caped Crusader', which had its own movie spin-off in 1966 (available on BD in the UK). Various 'toons have kept the character going on the small screen ever since, but his real breakthrough came with Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989. Three blockbuster sequels followed in the '90s, before Chris Nolan relit the franchise fires with his recent *Dark Knight* trilogy.

Disc pick: The Dark Knight

AV thrills abound on the BD of this acclaimed sequel, especially the IMAX scenes ■





Ready to rumble

Mark Craven reports on an attic conversion that includes a high-end speaker array and D-BOX seating

ONCE YOU'VE HAD a demo of D-BOX seating, it's hard to look at your regular sofa again in the same way. It's no surprise, therefore, that the owner of this bespoke cinema room was seduced by the 'movie motion' experience after an initial recce at UK distributor Pulse Marketing, and insisted it was part of the conversion plan. As such, all the seats (from US brand Fortress) were ordered 'D-BOX ready'. The two prime seats in the

front row are fitted with actuators – the remaining six can be upgraded easily whenever the owner wants.

Of course, firstly installer Finite Solutions outlined a range of setups based around the room dimensions, with CAD drawings employed to ensure speaker placement, throw ratios and viewing angles were all on song. With the owner's approval gained for the system here, it was time to get to work.

American muscle

Much of the other hardware in this cinema also hails from across the pond, including the speakers, amps/processor and projector. The latter comes from Runco, and was specified to meet the owner's demands for high quality and installer Finite Solutions' insistence on hitting the required brightness levels with the Screen Research screen and Reference ClearPix2 fabric. The LS-12d may



ROOM CHECKLIST

RUNCO: LS-12d projector – three-chip, 3D, 2,100 ANSI Lumens – with separate DC-300 video processor
RUNCO: Cineglide motorised anamorphic lens
PROCELLA AUDIO: 9 x P8 on-wall speakers; 2 x P15 subwoofers
SCREEN RESEARCH: Multi-masking, THX-certified acoustically transparent screen Supports 2.40:1, 2.35:1, 1.78:1 and 1.85:1 content
SHERBOURN: PT-7020 processor
SHERBOURN: PA 7-150 and PA 2-250 amps
FORTRESS: Matinee seats with electric recline function and D-BOX 3250i actuators fed by a Series IV controller
OPPO: BDP-103EU Blu-ray player

not be one of the brand's high-brightness 'HB' models, but still enables the system to deliver 26fl (Foot Lamberts) with 2D material. Naturally, brightness drops when the Runco is used for stereoscopic thrills.

'Partnered with the motorised Cineglide anamorphic lens [also from Runco], this projection system is as happy with 1.78:1 material as it is with 2.35/2.40:1 ratio content,' explains the installer. Lateral masking frames



All the Fortress chairs are D-BOX ready

Neat cable wiring is a key part of any AV setup – it makes troubleshooting/maintenance so much easier!



The kit rack includes Arcam amps for additional zones in the house

the image and provides another boost to perceived contrast.

On the audio side, speakers from Procella Audio and amplification/processing from Sherbourn combine in a 9.2-channel system with a high output and bass presence. Three THX-certified two-way Procella Audio P8s are mounted behind the screen, while the remaining six provide enveloping surround. The subwoofers are the brand's P15 model

– high-end offerings (but not the company's flagship) with dual 15in drivers and 700W of onboard power.

Finishing touches to the space include a ceiling-mounted starfield, low-level lighting below the projector screen and at floor-level, Control4 system control and a swish-looking grey and blue finish.

The result is a top-floor theatre with a top-flight performance ■

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street.
01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street.
01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street.
01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street.
01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road.
01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street.
020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road.
020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street.
024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info

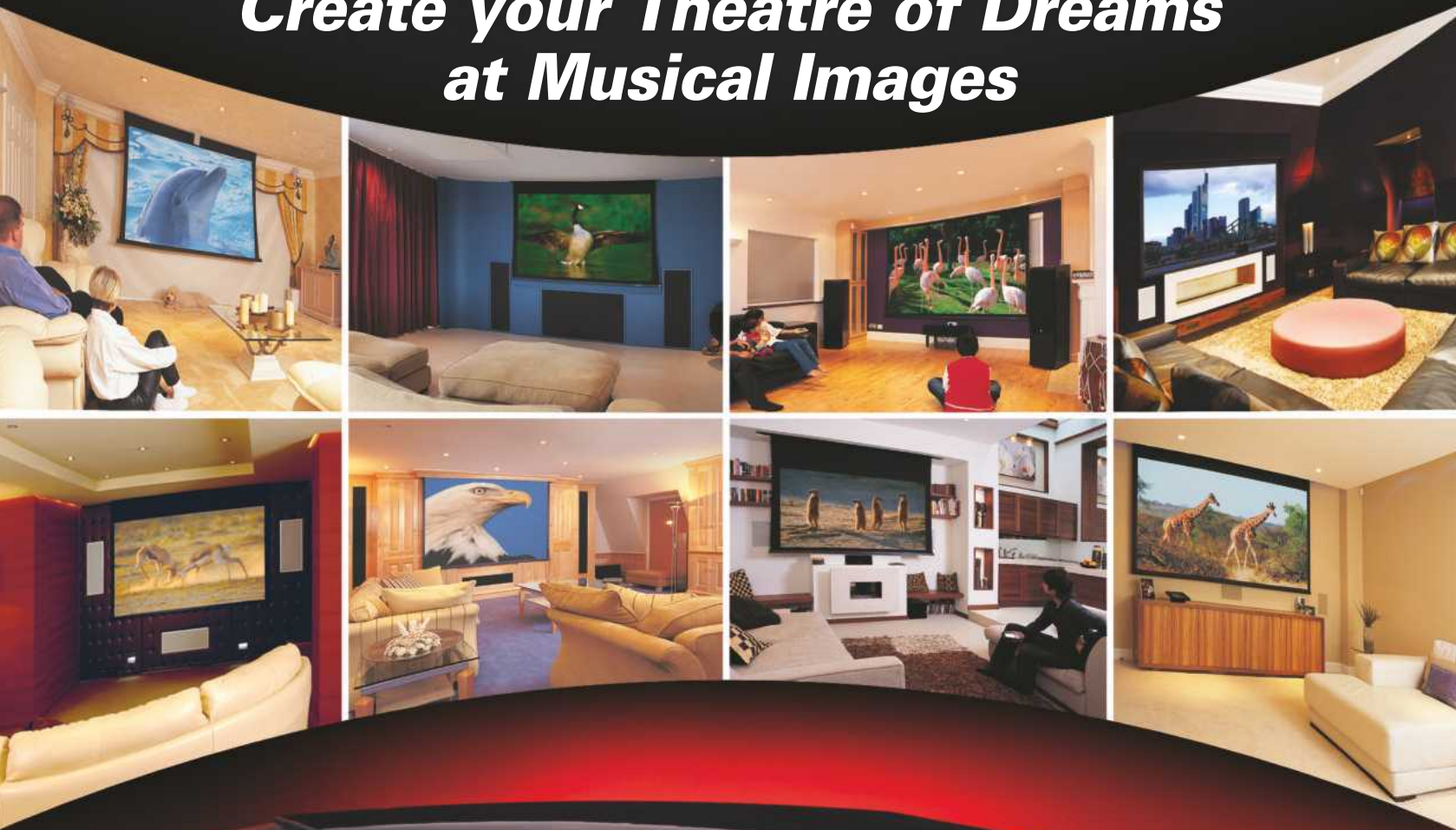


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VERDICT ★★★★★

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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** SONY 50in Smart LED Bravia TV **OPTOMA** HD30 single-chip DLP projector **OPPO** Revamped premium-grade Blu-ray player **MARANTZ** Slim-line AV receiver **SVS** Mid-price 12in subwoofer **PHILIPS** HD Ready ultra short-throw projector **SYNOLOGY** NAS with AV transcoding **ROUNDUP** Four 40in/42in affordable TVs go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

Dark stars

Roth Audio's OLi RA speaker array provides big bangs for your buck. Reviewed on p48



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Sony's mid-range 50-incher is so good, **Steve May** thinks you may wonder why you should pay more

Delusions of digital grandeur

THE TEMPTATION IS to call 'time' already. If you want a superb 1080p LED connected TV, look no further. Buying conundrum solved – this Sony is all you need. Let's hit the izakaya. Of course, to be that presumptuous would be madness. This new W8 doesn't even lead Sony's own 2014 TV fleet, for crying out loud...

Netflix gets its own button on Sony's new handset



In terms of design, the W8 is a paragon of economy. The bezel is wistfully slight, barely big enough for Sony's BRAVIA branding and belying the actual screen dimensions. The black metallic trim is just enough to frame the image, but the look is premium and provides better contrast than silver or grey alternatives.

Connectivity on this £900 TV isn't skimped on either. You get four HDMI and two USBs – one intended for recording programmes from the Freeview HD (or DVB-S satellite) tuner to an external drive – plus component and phono AV inputs. And, as this is aimed at Mr and Mrs average, there's also a Scart. Wi-Fi is integrated, although an Ethernet port is provided for wiser owls with a hardwired network connection to their viewing room.

Sony has made some changes to its Smart usability this year, and appears to be taking a lead from its market-leading rival Samsung. The understated menu integration for connected content that I liked a lot last season has been benched, replaced with a full screen of streaming apps from the Sony Entertainment Network (aka SEN). It's hugely unsubtle, lacking the elegance of what went before. It'll carry more impact in store, though, which is probably the thinking behind the twist. This interface is also a little sluggish, reflecting a lack of processing grunt for the task.

Sony has similarly taken a lead from Samsung's S-Recommendation engine, with its new One Flick Discovery/recommendation system, but this is an altogether more successful swipe.

A number of Discovery bars revolve at the bottom of the screen. In addition to offering content suggestions for upcoming linear TV and radio shows, YouTube and Sony's own Video Unlimited movie streaming offerings, you can create your own bars with keywords. Another newcomer is Social View, a Twitter implementation that disgorges a stream of Tweets across the bottom of the screen.

While Sony can't yet offer a full house of mainstream catch-up (just BBC iPlayer and Demand 5), there's no real shortage of 'net TV services to peruse. Netflix leads the pack (and indeed warrants its own button on the cheapo remote), followed by YouTube, Amazon Instant Video, Mubi, BBC News and a bunch of loopy left-field offerings.

The TV is also a DLNA-certified media player, although my early sample wasn't quite on form. Fed a USB stick, the set did a good job with most popular codecs and containers, including MKV, WMV and AVIs. However, while it could see my DLNA servers across a network, it crashed moments after securing a connection. Hopefully this file flibble is nothing a simple firmware update won't fix.

Lofty ambitions

Ultimately, what makes the W8 such good value is its image quality. This TV clearly has no sense of its relatively affordable stature; it's positively delusional when it comes to matters of class.

Sony has swapped its W8 panel supplier from last year, and this has yielded slightly

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Mid-range 50in Smart 3D TV

POSITION: Above the non-3D W7, below the wedge-shaped W85 and 1080p range-topping W95

PEERS: Samsung UE50F6200; LG 47LA860W

Sony's X-Reality PRO engine helps
deliver sharp HD images

DRAGON WARS

*The Hobbit: The
Desolation of
Smaug attacks
on BD, p96*





While not Sony's flagship set, the W8 still sports a classy design

better blacks. Combined with lush colour reproduction and the ability of Sony's proprietary X-Reality Pro picture algorithm to deliver lemon-like image sharpness, it delivers a picture fit enough to mingle undetected amongst the flatpanel elite.

Band of Brothers (Blu-ray) stylistically uses film grain to great effect, and this is exasperated by scenes of white, winter warfare. A lesser processor would struggle

'This Sony will keep images crisp, yet doesn't lumber them with unwanted artefacts'

to separate true detail from such gritty noise, yet the W8 is able to distinguish between the two and there's very little onscreen collateral damage. Threadbare uniforms are given tangible texture. The TV also does a remarkable job balancing the high contrast, retaining shadow detail in bombed-out French farmhouses and German tanks yet not bleaching the snowy battlefields.

Adaptive X-Reality PRO processing is applied to all sources, from broadcast TV to streaming internet services. On/Off comparisons reveal significantly more image delineation when engaged, yet there's no additional processing artefacts.

While the W8 offers a reasonable amount of fine tuning, you need only dial down the sharpness dial (to no more than 25 on the scale) to get a premium performance.

The KDL-50W829 also proves remarkably good off axis. There's very little contrast or

vibrancy sacrificed if you get lumbered with the cheap seats.

Perhaps, though, Sony's greatest engineering coup is its motion handling. Here the W8 strides ahead of rivals. It's not just image smoothness that's so impressive; the set excels when it comes to motion picture detail resolution. There's a host of Motionflow XR800 modes on offer, most of which are able to magically maintain Full HD resolution.

I measured the modes and discovered definition at 6.5ppf (pixels per frame) maxed out at 1080 lines in Clear, Clear Plus and Impulse modes. Even the Standard setting delivers around 950 lines. This TV will keep images crisp yet doesn't lumber the picture with ugly processing artefacts. This makes the W8 absolutely ideal for sports coverage.

Recognising that frame interpolation isn't always desired, because it's not inherently cinematic, Sony also provides a film-friendly mode. True Cinema doesn't retain motion resolution above around 600 lines but traditionalists will probably prefer the viewing experience because there's no soap opera effect. For gamers there's also a low-lag games mode, which again proves highly effective. This TV can cater for all sources.

Surprisingly, Sony's LED thinscreen also sounds rather better than physics might indicate. Downward-firing bass reflex speakers, housed in a slightly expanded lower-section of the bezel, manage to deliver a modicum of channel separation. If you hanker after proper extended bass then Sony offers a wireless subwoofer for £250, but your money would probably be better spent on a dedicated sound system or higher-spec soundbar.

The aforementioned change of LCD panel supplier has also led to a return of Active Shutter 3D. Two pairs of glasses are included in the box. While less comfortable to wear than passive specs, the stereography is undeniably effective, with no enormous penalty paid in overall brightness. There's some inescapable crosstalk double imaging, clearly evidenced by the menu screen for perennial 3D favourite *Tangled*, but for the odd special event viewing and kids' content it's enjoyably immersive.

Full HD heroics

The KDL-50W829 is astonishingly good value. As a connected Smart TV it's bolstered by the new content discovery engine, and usability is high. Yet what makes this such a killer proposition is its 1080p image performance. In terms of detail and motion picture handling, it's fabulous. Perhaps you won't need that 4K upgrade just yet... ■

ON THE MENU



→ Sony's revamped UI arranges all your apps in a largescale grid layout. It certainly makes it easy to browse, but the experience is somewhat sluggish compared to rivals with more processing power

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. 1 x Freeview HD; 1 x DVB-S satellite

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; component; phono AV; Scart; Ethernet; 2 x USB; digital optical audio output; CI slot

SOUND: 16W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 1 million:1

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1116(w) x 656(h) x 162(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 13.6kg

FEATURES: Motionflow XR800; media file playback from USB and network; integrated Wi-Fi, X-Reality PRO processing engine; Clearaudio +; One-Flick Discovery UI and Sony Entertainment network

HCC VERDICT



Sony KDL-50W829

→ £900 Approx → www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0845 6000 124

HIGHS: Excellent image quality; superb motion handling; One-Flick Discovery recommendation engine; slim bezel design

LOWS: Social View feature intrusive; flaky media server performance; sluggish SEN Smart screen; Active Shutter 3D crosstalk

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Danny Phillips is used to seeing compact sub/sat arrays at this sub-£1,000 price point. Roth's OLi RAs dare to be different

Brit speakers that can stand proud

INSANE HIGH-END SPEAKERS carved from pure unicorn horn by Apollo himself are all well and good if you can afford them, but what about mere mortals with only a meagre budget to play with? Don't they deserve spectacular sound quality, too?

Well according to Roth, yes they do. That's why the British audio brand has unleashed the OLi RA speaker series, which aims to deliver classy home cinema sound at a price that won't break the bank.

The RA of the name stands for Richard Allen, a respected speaker designer of some 20 years and the brains behind the Arcaydis and EB Acoustics brands. Allen has lent his expert lug-holes to these new Roth designs in a bid to tease out the best possible performance for the money.

It's a canny move – cash-conscious buyers get an affordable speaker system with the seal of approval from a guy who knows his audio onions.

This third-generation OLi range features two floorstanders, the RA4 and smaller RA3, plus two bookshelf models, the RA2 and RA1 (£400, £300, £150 and £100 per pair respectively). The £100 C30 centre and £250 KH30 subwoofer complete the lineup.

You can chop and change as you please depending on room size and budget, but we've plumped for a 5.1 setup with a pair of RA4s at the front, RA1s on surround duty plus the centre and subwoofer. That comes in at a wallet-friendly £850.

Well-crafted

Standing 962mm tall at the front of the system is the flagship RA4, a surprisingly well-crafted speaker for the money. The cabinet is reassuringly hefty and there are no visible seams or screws, just a single solid chunk of sonic goodness. The styling is distinctly modern. It's slathered from head to toe in a smooth matt black finish, with curved

edges that cry out for living room acceptance. To make it even more discreet, Roth supplies magnetic grilles that snap snugly onto the front (when some brands still employ fiddly plugs on much more expensive designs). If you prefer them naked then the cones, phase plugs and surrounds all blend in with the cabinet's finish. It's a good look.

This two-way speaker features two 6.5in woven fibreglass hybrid drivers for midrange and bass (compared with 5.25in drivers in the RA3s), plus a 1in silk dome tweeter.

The C30's matching finish and curves ensure aesthetic consistency across the system, and its driver array includes two 5.25in cones and a 1in tweeter nestled between them.

At only 231mm high, RA1 is the range's most compact bookshelf speaker and leaves

a small, manageable footprint. It's based on Roth's previous OLi 10, employing a 4in driver and 1in tweeter. Close inspection of the cabinet reveals more of the same solid, robust build quality and suave styling, which is remarkable given they cost a mere £100 per pair.

In terms of spec and cosmetics, the KH30 subwoofer doesn't let the side down. Its heavy build quality surprises considering the £250 price tag, while its curvy edges and matt finish again match the rest of the system.

It's a front-firing, fairly compact affair, with an 8in woofer that can be covered up with a magnetic grille. The rear panel offers the usual array of controls and inputs, including volume and crossover knobs, and a phase reversal switch.

Boisterous performer

When it comes to performance, the OLi RA system punches so far above its weight it makes David vs Goliath look like a fair contest. Listening to the system belt out a boisterous blockbuster like *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, it seems preposterous that the whole lot retails for under a grand.

What struck me immediately is the size and scale. The movie's wild opening scene shows Kirk and Bones fleeing the Nibiru natives against the backdrop of an erupting volcano, and fittingly the OLIs generate an explosive soundstage that's alive with big dynamics and quick, confident effects distribution.

As the pair dash through the jungle, the natives' spears zip past the camera and split tree trunks with a piercing crack, while the deftly-handled score lends momentum and drama.

And when Spock finds himself stranded inside the volcano, the Roth cabinets put you right in there with him – massive waves of rumbling, growling lava rise up and fill the front of the room, while the RA1s whip up a swirling vortex of hissing flames behind you.



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1-channel
speaker package

POSITION:
Currently Roth's
only speaker range

PEERS:
Monitor Audio
Radius R90HT1;
Cambridge
Audio Aero;
Quad L-ite Plus 5.1



Build quality and design impresses on
this budget floorstanding package

The 8in subwoofer provides line-level and speaker-level inputs



The floorstanding RA4s deliver these sounds with drive and control, while their impressive bass extension ensures a deeper and more fulsome sound than the sort of compact speakers you could buy for the same price. They comfortably handle loud volumes, too.

Some might find the RA1's rear stage a little small by comparison, but their presentation is crisp and precise and you could always step up to the RA2s if you want a little more oomph.

'When it comes to performance, this Roth OLi surround package punches far above its weight'

I also had the benefit of hearing the system in action with RA1s installed at both front and rear, and although the soundstage is admirably punchy and engaging, the step up in depth and dynamics when switching to the bigger RA4s is remarkable and well worth the extra £300.

Cinematic cohesion

Also impressive is the system's integration. An even tonal balance across the soundfield means effects are ushered seamlessly between channels, while the sub's punchy low frequencies fuse tightly with the other speakers. Just one incongruous element could yank you back to reality, but thankfully the OLi RAs' coherent sound keeps you immersed and entertained.

But what astounded me most for the money is the system's crisp, expressive high-frequency presentation. Every scene is dripping with detail, such as the hissing water as the *Enterprise* rises out of the sea or the chirping jungle wildlife on Nibiru. Despite this, the sound isn't overly clinical – it's merely the icing on a very rich and delicious cake. Treble sounds natural, not thin or spitty, and lends a pleasing sense of subtlety and texture. This is most clearly heard in dialogue, right down to the hiss of an 'S' or the pop of a 'P'. The rich, treacly growl of Benedict Cumberbatch's voice is a particular treat.

This 5.1 array is surprisingly musical too, handling a 96kHz/24-bit FLAC of *All Will Surely Burn* by Sons of Kemet with panache. It picks out plenty of detail in this chaotic jazz arrangement, from the leading edges of snare drums to crashing cymbals, while the saxophone, trumpet and rattling percussion are cleanly separated. Called upon for a house party, these won't disappoint.

Up for the fight

I won't pretend Roth's OLi RA package trumps the dynamics, insight and musicality of bigger, pricier floorstanding systems, but its authoritative, detailed sound is good enough to scare most of the similarly-priced competition.

The fact you can even buy a system with such well-made floorstanders for this price is remarkable in itself, all of which makes the OLi RAs astoundingly good value for money. At this price there are plenty of packages to audition, but these certainly deserve your attention. It's also currently Roth's only speaker range – perhaps it should release some more... ■

SPECIFICATIONS

OLI RA4

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 6.5in woven fibreglass hybrid drivers; 1 x 1in Black Diamond silk dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Two-way, rear-ported tower
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 97dB
POWER HANDLING: 150W
DIMENSIONS: 215(w) x 965(h) x 325(d)mm
WEIGHT: 16.5kg

OLI RA1

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in woven fibreglass hybrid cone; 1 x 1in silk dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Two-way, rear-ported bookshelf
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 85dB
POWER HANDLING: 50W
DIMENSIONS: 151(w) x 231(h) x 153(d)mm
WEIGHT: 2.4kg

OLI C30

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4in woven fibreglass hybrid driver; 1 x 1in silk dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Two-way, rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 100Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 84dB
POWER HANDLING: 80W
DIMENSIONS: 530(w) x 180(h) x 203(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8kg

OLI KH30

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in woofer
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-500Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 200W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 298(w) x 298(h) x 343(d)mm
WEIGHT: 14.5kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono inputs; speaker-level outputs

HCC VERDICT



Roth OLi RA 5.1

→ £850 Approx → www.rothaudio.co.uk

→ Tel: 01753 682782

HIGHS: Great build quality and styling; remarkably detailed sound; good dynamics and seamless integration; fantastic value

LOWS: Comparatively small rear soundstage; plenty of competition

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Over the DLP rainbow

Optoma's HD30 1080p projector offers a great picture for the asking price, reports **Steve May**. But there are caveats...

WHILE THERE ARE a plethora of PJs available for around a grand, most will ask you to make some sort of sacrifice when it comes to visual performance, usually in terms of resolution or black level. After all, something has to give to hit that price point. Seemingly this isn't the case with Optoma's HD30 Full HD DLP offering. This precocious single-chipper throws an image that looks like it comes from a cabinet costing twice as much.

The unit itself is pleasingly domesticated, with a neatly designed gloss white cabinet sporting grey/silver accents. It verges on fashionable. Installation is a breeze, particularly if you intend to park it on a coffee table in front of a white wall. There are both horizontal and vertical image shift options, driven by simple onscreen arrows, plus vertical

keystone correction should you need it. Zoom is restricted to 1.2x, however.

Connectivity comprises two HDMI inputs, PC VGA, composite and analogue audio. There's also VGA out and RS232. Yet while the HD30 can obviously function in a corporate environment, this is clearly a home entertainment product. The menu is driven by familiar icons, such as a spanner for setup.

Once manually focused, it's immediately clear that 1080p image quality is extremely high. Like all single-chip DLP projectors, pictures are sharp and colours vibrant, as befits TI's BrilliantColor processing. The latter maxes out hues and comes into its own when used with both CGI animation or games content. Reds, always a challenge for rival LCD models at this price point, are deep and luscious.

Optoma offers enthusiasts a wide variety of calibration tools, including in-depth colour management. For those that don't want to tweak, there's a selection of well-judged display modes available, comprising Cinema, Reference, Photo, Bright and User. There is, however, no high frame-rate interpolation – not unusual on this class of kit – which means that motion resolution is rather limited. On the plus side, there are also no motion artefacts to contend with either. The unfettered image is rewardingly cinematic.

The projector is well behaved, particularly in Eco mode where fan noise falls to a very modest 26dB. Optoma rates lamp life in this configuration at 6,000 hours. At full brightness the HD30 burns 297W, dropping to 241W at the greener setting.

Optoma's 3D-ready HD30 ships with two pairs of active shutter glasses

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Upper budget Full HD 3D projector

POSITION:
Above the HD25e and HD25-LV; below the LED-based HD91

PEERS:
Vivitek H1185HD; BenQ W1300



While not the brightest light-cannon out there, the 1,600 Lumens cast by the HD30 will work well in any controllable environment. Images are dynamic without looking overly flushed – the brand quotes a 25,000:1 dynamic range, using Dynamic Black tech to boost peak whiteness. However, if you're hoping to use this PJ in moderate ambient light you may find it just doesn't have the intensity. Best invest in some blackout blinds.

There's not intrusive rainbow fringing in the image either. I tend to be sensitive to the colour wheel flashes of DLP, but this model displayed crisp, clean images. Even the dynamic monochrome of The Stone Roses doc *Made of Stone* didn't cause any fringing. It outperforms the similar BenQ W1300 in this regard.

The HD30 is 3D-ready and generously ships with two pairs of active 3D glasses. These work with the Vesa 3D system which requires an IR sync emitter to be attached to the projector. The stereoscopic performance of the HD30 is actually very good, with significant image depth. There's little in the way of irritating crosstalk artefacts.

As a gaming solution, the HD30 proves a bit of a thriller. It positively relishes the detail and colour available from Sony's next-gen PS4. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is a hyper-real experience on the big screen.

There are caveats to owning the HD30, though. It can be a frustrating machine to live

with. Infuriatingly, the projector constantly throws up an egg timer graphic following the issuing of a command, as though it needs to summon all its resources to comply. This task could be for something as basic as source selection – the Optoma seems to take an inordinate amount of time locating and locking onto an input. This rather throws a damper on the slick home cinema viewing experience. At the very least, Optoma should come up with something less goading than an egg timer.

Speak up!

Like other relatively budget projectors, the HD30 sports an integrated sound system, improbably rated by the brand at 16W. In truth, the noise it makes isn't fit for much beyond the occasional casual gaming session. SRS Wow audio processing is available but this merely emphasises dialogue and if anything makes the audio a little more shrill.

Optoma would do well to improve the usability of the projector too, as some elements of its UI design are far from intuitive. It took an age time to discover how to remove the mute graphic from the screen (which doesn't time out) when you've had enough of the onboard squawking. Operationally it just feels a little clunky.

That said, if you're hankering for some serious bigscreen bang for your buck, this Optoma is a formidable proposition ■

ON THE MENU

→ While the HD30 offers plenty of user tweaks, including a colour management system and vertical/horizontal lens shift, the icon-driven menus can be slow to respond to commands from the remote, and usability could be improved

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter (two pairs of glasses supplied)

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component; composite; 2 x 3.5mm analogue audio inputs; 3.5mm analogue audio output; RS232; 2 x VGA inputs; VGA output; 3D sync emitter

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,600 ANSI Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 25,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 324 x (w) x 95(h) x 234 (d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.1kg

FEATURES: Single-chip DLP; built-in audio; Eco mode; vertical/horizontal image shift; vertical keystone correction; 6,000 hours claimed lamp life; 26dB fan noise in Eco mode; Cinema, Reference, Photo, Bright and User picture presets; Dynamic Black; 1.50-1.8:1 throw ratio; 1.2x manual zoom



HCC VERDICT



Optoma HD30

→ £1,100 Approx → www.optoma.co.uk

→ Tel: 01923 691 80

HIGHS: Excellent image detail; good black level performance; no overt colour fringing

LOWS: Slow to navigate; egg-timer graphic is irritating; internal 16W sound system generally painful

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



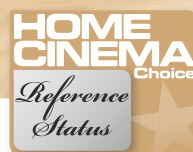
AV INFO

PRODUCT:
High-end
Blu-ray player

POSITION:
Top of Oppo's
lineup, above
the BDP-103D

PEERS:
Marantz UD7007;
Cambridge Audio
Azur 751BD;
Primare BD32

‘This remains the player to beat if you're looking to make the most of your disc and file collection – it's Blu-ray at its brilliant best’



Oppo's flagship deck now offers Dabbee and DSD – **Steve May** takes a closer look

Gilding the Blu-ray lily

THE OPPO BDP-105D is a spectacular antidote to the rash of lightweight cheapies that have come to define the mainstream Blu-ray player market. A fabulously engineered heavyweight disc-spinner that in this latest iteration inches even further into audiophile streaming territory.

A refreshed version of the reference status BDP-105EU launched last year, the BDP-105D may not be significantly different for the Oppo faithful to warrant trading up to, but it is sufficiently pimped to demand a fresh look.

The BDP-105D has the stature of a small AV receiver, but build quality is ferociously good. The front fascia, seemingly hailing from Tony Stark's own ironmongery, has a stylised trim that comes into its own when the light falls a particular way. The disc-loading tray slides out with refined deliberation, rather than clattering urgently. Pride of ownership definitely comes into play here.

To the right of the central disc tray are HDMI and USB ports (the former with support for MHL smartphone connection), plus a full-size headphone jack with a high-grade headphone amplifier that connects directly to one of the deck's two 32-bit Sabre DACs.

So straight from the off, you know this isn't a regular BD deck, and the rear of the unit adds to that feeling. For one thing, there are both phono and balanced XLR stereo outputs, the latter allowing hookup to suitable active speakers or XLR-equipped amplification. This balanced stereo output provides an alternate connection from the deck's DAC, with the promise of less noise and superior signal reproduction.

There's also a full 7.1 set of phono audio outputs. The rub, of course, is that a growing majority of AV receivers

no longer offer a multichannel audio input. Yet for some this connectivity may remain a lure.

The BDP-105D boasts an HDMI loop-through, in addition to a pair of outputs. This dual output can be configured as a split feed, with video going through HDMI 1 and audio through HDMI 2, or as a Dual Display that outputs the same AV to different displays simultaneously. This is welcome flexibility.

There are also two sets of optical and coaxial digital audio inputs. One pair is flanked by an asynchronous USB-B port which supports 192kHz/24-bit streaming from a connected laptop. There are also two rear USB-A inputs, one of which is intended for the wireless dongle which is provided in the box, should you not be able to make use of the Ethernet connection.

Familiar interface

Those familiar with the standard Oppo interface and menu structure will find nothing has changed here. Key icons offer access to either a loaded disc, or music, video and photo files. A Network icon opens up your LAN and all the compliant devices you may have lurking there, be they PC or NAS, while the Settings tab offers refuge for tweekers.

Network file support for both sound and vision is excellent. All popular audio codecs and video



The full-size remote is logically designed



Audiophiles will love the 7.1 phonos, balanced XLR outputs and type A and B USB inputs

containers can be played – AAC, WAV, MP3, FLAC, DSD, Ogg Vorbis and WMA audio files, along with MPEG-2, AVI, MOVs and MKVs. Files that combine MKV with FLAC audio, and have defeated lesser media players on my test bench, are unwrapped with ease.

This isn't a player with much in the way of IPTV services. There's a small selection of apps comprising Netflix, BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Picasa, BBC News and Sport. You also get a range of non-functioning apps, at least as far as UK users are concerned, including CinemaNow, Film Fresh, Pandora and Vudu. This is beginning to irritate.

A dual-core processor means the Oppo is speedy, both when it comes to navigating the UI and loading a disc. The Java-lite Lou Reed concert platter *Berlin* goes from open tray to menu in just 22 seconds. The more complex *Goldfinger* delivers its menu in 47 seconds.

Darbee divides opinion

One of the more interesting features on the BDP-105D is Darbee Visual Presence. This offers three types of image processing, with variable intensity on each: Full Pop, Hi-def and Game. What exactly is Darbee doing? To shed some light on the processing in action, I used a 1080p monoscope with Darbee effects visible in a scrolling split screen. On Full Pop, it was clear that the processor was creating intrusive imaging artefacts when used at more than 20 per cent; the higher the processing power the worse the smeary effect. At less than 20 per cent, the artefacts became undetectable, but then so did any major benefit. Both the Hi-Def and Gaming modes prove less disruptive, but outside of a minor contrast lift I personally can't see any reason to indulge it. Some of my colleagues are more amenable to it – feel free to experiment.

Frankly, this Oppo doesn't need additional help. In terms of visual acuity, the BDP-105D is natively sublime. HD images offer monumental detail and texture retrieval. This player, coupled to an upscaled 4K display (a Sony X9) delivers an almost holographic image. Anyone arguing that *Gravity* can only really be appreciated in a cinema needs to get an eyeful of this combo.

Sonically, the Oppo takes anything in its stride. *Overture: The Earth* by Kosuke Yamashita, in 96kHz/24-bit 7.1 Dolby TrueHD sounds positively majestic; spacious and crystal clear. And, of course, CDs can take advantage of the deck's excellent DAC, outputting high-fidelity analogue stereo.

While the BDP-105D largely shows all other players in its price range a clear pair of heels, there are elements to the spec that not everyone will want or need. I'll wager that those XLR connections will find employment in a relatively limited number of systems, and, personally speaking, I don't want a laptop anywhere near my AV system. However, if you're interested in DSD as a high-quality music option then the player's new support over USB will be welcome. From a practical of view, the sheer size of DSD remains a deterrent to general adoption (far better to invest in Blu-ray Pure Audio discs, which this Oppo was born to play), but the file format certainly sounds sensational. SACD and DVD-A discs are also supported as a matter of course.

Interestingly, the BDP-105D can play both DSD 64 stereo and multichannel DSD files (I used content from 2L). However it failed to play my 2L-sourced Double DSD test files from USB media, even though support is claimed – perhaps a firmware update will solve this. The deck doesn't play any DSD across a network.

While I would normally advocate system builders opt for a separate DAC – not least because of the enormous choice and increasing performance of what's available, there's no doubt that this Sabre-toothed Oppo competes at a very high level.

Versatile AV star

Overall, the BDP-105D retains its reference status, not least because of the bravura nature of its AV chops and that positively divine construction. While I'm unconvinced by the Darbee processor, and acknowledge that certain aspects of the spec are eclectic at best, this remains the player to beat if you're looking to make the most of your disc and file collection. Immensely versatile, this is Blu-ray at its brilliant best ■

ON THE MENU



→ The BDP-105D uses a dual-core engine that results in smooth, fast navigation of its icon-led user interface. Making setup tweaks and finding networked files is a breeze, but there are still options for rogue apps (Vudu, Pandora, etc) that can't be accessed

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K using Qdeo processor
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: Yes. 2 x v1.4 outputs (with ARC); 2 x v1.4 inputs (one front-mounted, MHL compatible)
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: Yes. 7.1 and stereo phono; stereo balanced
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. Coaxial and optical inputs; coaxial and optical outputs
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: No, but Wi-Fi dongle is supplied
SACD / DVD-A: Yes/Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 123(h) x 311(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.9kg
FEATURES: Asynchronous USB-B DAC input; Darbee Visual Presence processor; digital volume on all analogue outputs; Gracenote look-up for all music inputs with cover art display; 3 x USB ports; app control; bespoke toroidal power supply; dedicated headphone amplifier; DLNA media playback with DMP and DMR features; extensive file support including MKV, AVI, MOV, MPEG, MP3, WMA, WAV, FLAC, DSD; RS-232 control; IR port, fanless design

HCC VERDICT



Oppo BDP-105D

→ £1,000 Approx → www.oppo-bluray.co.uk
 → Tel: 0845 060 9395

HIGHS: Stunning build quality; excellent video performance; audiophile-grade music playback; versatile connectivity

LOWS: Darbee Visual Presence of questionable value; inaccessible Smart apps on UI; DSD 128 file failure on our sample

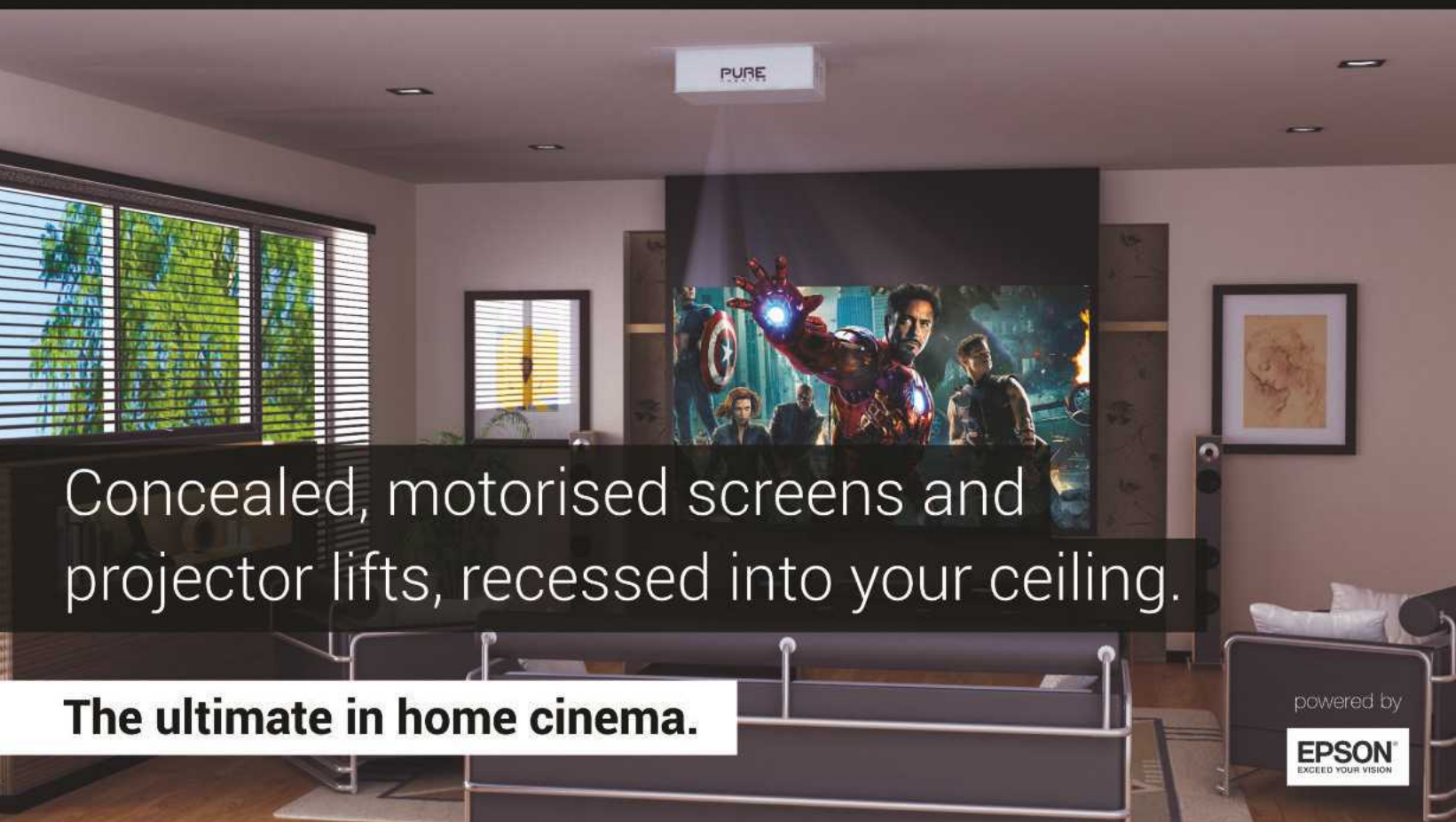
Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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40in/42in TV tussle!

John Archer pits a quartet of affordable flatscreens against one another to see which is most deserving of his hard-earned pennies



FINLUX 40F8073-T

Just £300 will get you this Smart LED TV

SAMSUNG UE42F5000

Stripped of features, but good where it counts

SONY KDL-42W653

The priciest set here – but is it also the best?

TOSHIBA 40L6353

Sleek design and Cloud TV are the highlights here

The budget contender

Finlux hopes to challenge its rivals by undercutting on price but keeping things Smart

WI-FI OPTION

Finlux allows wireless hookup via a supplied USB dongle



THE 40F8073-T IS precisely the sort of TV that stops the big AV brands from sleeping at night. While Finlux might not have the marketing muscle of the household names, it's delivered a 40in TV with Smart features and a surprisingly decent picture performance for £300. That's £100 cheaper than any of our other entrants in this cut-price contest – although any rise in your pulse caused by the 40F8073-T's price is likely to be quickly quelled by the set's rather dated looks and budget finish.

At least the TV's rear is made attractive by its carriage of a healthy trio of HDMI inputs and a pair of USB ports. There's also an Ethernet jack and Wi-Fi – though the latter only materialises if you insert a provided Wi-Fi dongle into one of the USB ports. This lack of truly integrated Wi-Fi adds to the sense that the 40F8073-T is built around a rather elderly chassis.

The 40F8073-T proffers an online content portal. This is understandably small in its scope, with highlights limited to Netflix, YouTube, BBC iPlayer, Twitter, Facebook, ITN, iConcerts and Flickr. But it's easy to argue that any online service on a £300 TV count as a great result, as is the Freeview HD tuner, something you wouldn't necessarily expect to find at this price.

The screen is capped at a 50Hz refresh rate and is pretty much devoid of picture processing aids, but the picture tweaks it carries extend to the ability to fine-tune the RGB colour components.

Experience of numerous other ultra-affordable TVs from relatively little-known brands didn't exactly get my hopes up for the 40F8073-T's picture quality, but actually it doesn't do badly at all. The dark shots deep in the interior of the cargo ship at the heart of the *Captain Phillips* Blu-ray, for instance, enjoy black levels deeper than those I was prepared for. Also there's thankfully only the slightest hint of the ugly backlight clouding problems that I've seen on some other Finlux TVs in the past.

Upon first firing up the 40F8073-T its pictures did strike me as looking rather noisy. Reducing the brightness and contrast settings soon fixed this, while also leaving a more contrast-rich and colour-neutral image.

Colours don't ever, it must be said, achieve the same level of subtle toning and naturalism found elsewhere in this group test, leaving some skin tones in *Captain Phillips* looking a touch peaky. But nor are colours as overcooked and simplistically rendered as the frankly quite nasty efforts often witnessed on other 'über-cheap' TVs.

The 40F8073-T's HD pictures look decently sharp, and while the sharpness undoubtedly slides when there's lots of motion in the picture, Finlux's screen does at least avoid any overt smearing problems.

Cost considerations

Not surprisingly there are other signs of the corners cut by the 40F8073-T to hit its £300 mark, such as some shimmering noise over

areas of fine detail and a rather flimsy audio performance that starts to sound thin and weedy when fed anything more potent than a simple 'news-style' TV show. I also found the USB Wi-Fi dongle only offering a very limited reception range compared with typical integrated Wi-Fi systems.

However, I'm not inclined to consider any of these flaws deal breakers at the 40F8073-T's price level. So, with a respectably low and thus gaming-friendly input lag measurement of 32ms wrapping proceedings up, the 40F8073-T is overall way better than you've any right to expect for such a puny amount of money. The TV times are definitely a-changing...

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; 2 x USB; CI slot; Scart; coaxial digital audio output; composite input; Ethernet; component video input
SOUND: 2 x 8W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 350cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 930(w) x 554(h) x 41(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 15kg
FEATURES: Wi-Fi via included USB dongle; Smart TV system including Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube; RGB colour adjustment; Pause/Record live TV to USB drive; Skype support via optional USB camera; web browser

Only one thing on its mind

Samsung's £400 42in model is solely focused on delivering pristine Full HD pictures



LACKING BRAINS

Access to Samsung's Smart portal is a no-go here

THE UNDISPUTED KING of the cut-price telly market for the past couple of years has to be Samsung. No other brand has so successfully and consistently combined aggressive pricing with good performance and long feature lists. So my hopes are naturally high for Samsung's 42-incher.

A concern immediately surfaces, though, as I lift the UE42F5000 out of its packaging. By TV standards it's as light as a feather – something only possible if the bodywork is made more or less entirely out of cheap and cheerful plastic. The UE42F5000 is doused in enough gloss to just about disguise its flimsiness, but the set is far from a design classic by Samsung's illustrious standards. It looks a bit outdated.

Its connections aren't exactly state-of-the-art either, with key options sticking at two HDMI's, a single USB input and an Ethernet port. There's no Wi-Fi, and Ethernet is only there to enable streaming of multimedia from networked PCs, or for supporting the built-in Freeview HD tuner. It does not deliver access to Samsung's class-leading online content portal. This is a disappointment.

As with all the other TVs in this group, the UE42F5000 is not 3D capable, but it does manage to deliver one or two 'beyond basic' features, including 100Hz playback and a picture adjustment suite expansive enough to encompass white balance and flesh tone adjustments, plus multiple settings for the provided dynamic contrast and noise reduction systems.

After a little work with some of the set's picture tweaks – most notably reducing the backlight to between 8 and 9 to maximise black level response and remove backlight clouding – the UE42F5000 turns out to be a chip off the Samsung block where picture quality is concerned.

The TV neatly sidesteps almost all of the usual problems associated with affordable LCD TVs. For instance, it handles the exceptionally sharp pictures of the *Captain Phillips* Blu-ray (which is derived from a 4K master) superbly for a budget set, delivering the whole film with exceptional crispness and detail rather than leaving the HD source looking soft and 'low-def'.

This crispness isn't massively damaged by motion in the frame, or *Captain Phillips'* director Paul Greengrass's trademark twitchy camerawork. This motion clarity is probably thanks to a combination of a faster-than-average response time from the panel and Samsung's 100Hz engine.

The UE42F5000 does a good job of handling the fairly extreme colour palette of *Captain Phillips*, with everything from the rich orange of the lifeboat through to the low-lit skin tones of the crew hiding below decks looking surprisingly – and consistently – convincing. In an ideal world there would be a bit more dynamism to the UE42F5000's colour palette, but ideal worlds and £400 42in TVs never go hand in hand!

The black level response falls a little further short of that seen on Samsung's higher-end

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; USB; CI slot; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; Ethernet; component video input
SOUND: 2 x 10W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 972(w) x 577 (h) x 49(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 8.7kg
FEATURES: Colour management system; 100Hz system; multimedia playback via USB or home network; noise reduction; Dynamic Contrast

models than I'd like. However, by the standards of the competition black levels are actually quite good – and *Captain Phillips'* night-time scenes are certainly rich in shadow detail.

Sonically satisfying

The UE42F5000 accompanies its mostly strong picture performance with an above-average audio effort. The key to its success is that it accepts its volume, treble range and bass limitations right from the off, and so never over-reaches itself to a point where the soundstage becomes distorted or overwrought – even when piped the extreme dynamics of *The Dark Knight Rises* soundtrack.

Sealing the UE42F5000's incredibly competitive deal is an input lag figure of 34ms, which makes it a potentially effective monitor for video gaming. ➤

Finding its affordable feet

This Sony Bravia offers the performance chops to sit at the heart of any AV setup



DIGITAL DEARTH

Like the Samsung set, Sony's TV only offers two HDMI jacks

WHILE SONY TENDS to fare decently well in the upper levels of the TV business, it's struggled to compete recently elsewhere in the market. However, the KDL-42W653, which has tumbled in price since its 2013 release to a sub-£500 price point, could be its savour.

Its design is decent, mixing a very trim but sturdy frame and a startlingly minimalist stand. Jutting from the TV's lower edge is a little silver box that's much more than just a style feature, for it houses the TV's 'brains' – brains which include Sony's X-Reality Pro picture processing system. Experience of higher-end Sony TVs suggests that X-Reality Pro works a treat, so its presence here is very welcome.

Connectivity initially doesn't impress. The Sony joins the Samsung set in only managing two HDMI's and one USB. However, it outguns the Samsung by offering Wi-Fi to go with its Ethernet port and enabling access to Sony's 2013 SEN online content platform.

SEN is a solid online service, with a fairly high level of video-on-demand content and an attractive if rather long-winded onscreen menu system. It doesn't manage to include ITV Player or 4OD among its video options, but let's not be too sniffy here – it's better than that offered by today's rivals.

The KDL-42W653's picture specs include a 200Hz motion engine and an edge LED lighting system that will hopefully benefit from Sony's (mostly) impressive recent track record of eking excellent contrast out of LED technology. Yet not surprisingly this screen

doesn't enjoy the local dimming technology of Sony's top-end sets. It also doesn't feature a particularly comprehensive suite of picture calibration tools – so it's just as well you don't really need such tools to get the KDL-42W653 producing remarkably good pictures...

Contrasting fortunes

The key to the Sony's pictorial success is contrast. This is usually the toughest picture element for an affordable TV to handle, yet the KDL-42W653 reproduces the night-time sequences in *Captain Phillips* with a depth of blackness and a quantity of subtle greyscale and shadow detail information that some TVs costing more don't get close to.

These excellent black levels are accompanied by a refreshingly nuanced and boldly-saturated colour palette that's capable of both pouncing on *Captain Phillips*' richly coloured external daylight sequences, while also showing a deft touch during the film's more subdued, grittier moments.

The pristine Blu-ray transfer doesn't look quite as sharp and detailed as it does on the Samsung UE42F5000, but some might well prefer the Sony's gentler approach to HD on the grounds that it looks slightly less noisy and a little more 'organic'. Especially as the marginally softer look to HD isn't down to any major weaknesses with motion processing. In fact, the KDL-42W653 handles all of the movie's fast camera movements exceptionally naturally, limiting judder without making the picture appear processed.

It's hard to find anything really concrete not to like about the Sony's pictures, so let's move on to its audio – which is, it must be said, less accomplished relative to the competition than its pictures are. This is thanks chiefly to a shortage of bass – action scenes sound rather apologetic. The mid-range is reasonably open and powerful, though, leaving voices well rounded, and providing treble detailing with enough breathing room to avoid harshness.

The last thing I checked with the Sony was its input lag. Gamers will be delighted to hear that I measured just 7ms of delay in the screen reproducing pictures received at its inputs – one of the lowest such figures I've seen. Time to get fragging.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
4K: No, 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes, Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; USB; CI slot; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; Ethernet; component video input
SOUND: 2 x 8W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 954(w) x 568(h) x 69(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 11.4kg
FEATURES: Smart TV system including Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and more; built-in Wi-Fi; Motionflow XR 200Hz system; media playback from USB or home network; X-Reality Pro processing engine; Advanced Contrast Enhancer; MPEG noise reduction; Dynamic Backlight Control

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Get yourself connected

A wealth of inputs – and Smart TV – make this Toshiba great for content junkies

DESIGN DIVA

The Tosh sports a neat aesthetic that should blend in easily



THE 40L6353 GETS off to a good start by looking better than any of its rivals. The design stands out from the budget hordes with its fetching combination of a deep grey, super-slim bezel and shiny silver strip along the bottom. Yes, it becomes obvious as you're setting up the TV that the bodywork is predominantly fairly lightweight plastic, but at least it hides this fact better than most.

The star connection attraction is its roster of four HDMI's – as many as you'd expect to find on a high-end TV. It also goes further in multimedia terms than its rivals here by offering two USBs for direct multimedia playback as well as Ethernet and built-in Wi-Fi options for either streaming content from networked computers or going online with Toshiba's Cloud TV platform.

Cloud TV isn't on the A-list of online TV services, thanks to a sluggish operating system and fairly significant shortage of content, especially in the catch-up TV/on-demand TV department. But it does have one or two good ideas, including a simple recommendations system, and the ability to surf TV listings on smartphones and tablets rather than the TV screen. Plus the Twitter window on the home screen now features a language filter, making it much less likely to teach little Johnny any interesting new words...

As usual with Toshiba TVs the 40L6353 features a diverse range of picture adjustments, including a colour management system. Also promising is the presence of a Full HD screen driven by a 100Hz engine that

aims to tackle affordable LCD's traditional problems with motion.

Fine-tune it first!

First impressions of the 40L6353's picture quality are troubling. I tend to start my picture tests by feeding TVs dark scenes to see how they fare with the key areas of contrast and black level response. When I did this with the nocturnal moments of *Captain Phillips*, especially those based around the life boat towards the film's end, there were some conspicuous patches of backlight clouding. Plus, as the amount of bright content in the image shifted I could see shifts in the overall backlight output level – a problem doubtless caused by a dynamic contrast system.

Thankfully you can improve both these issues fairly easily. Reducing the backlight output gets rid of most of the clouding (while also improving black level response), and turning off the dynamic contrast system sorts the jumping brightness problem.

Inevitably, this does also reduce the TV's contrast performance – yet the adjusted 40L6353 pictures still deliver a good black level response, and while shadow detailing in dark areas isn't as pronounced as it is on the Samsung and Sony sets, it's sufficient to stop the dark interiors of *Captain Phillips'* freight ship from looking totally hollow.

The 40L6353 delivers a strong colour performance, with some surprisingly natural tones and plenty of blend subtlety – indeed, it's in this area where the 40L6353 most

stands out from the budget TV masses, which tend to favour simplistic colour palettes with a noticeable PC temperature bias.

HD footage on the 40L6353 looks decently sharp, though a bit more resolution is lost over moving objects than is the case with the Sony and Samsung models. Judder when watching Blu-rays is also more aggressive than I'd like, and the set's upscaling of SD pictures results in a slightly noisy finish at times.

To finish on the positive note the 40L6353's performance overall deserves, I can report a gaming-friendly input lag figure of 32ms together with a stronger, cleaner, more well-rounded audio performance than I'd expected from a TV with such a super-slim chassis.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
4K: No, 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes, Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 2 x USB; CI slot; Scart; optical digital audio output; composite input; Ethernet; component video input
SOUND: 2 x 10W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 300cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 5,000:1 (native)
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 922(w) x 544(h) x 69(d)
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 5.85kg
FEATURES: Integrated Wi-Fi; Cloud TV system including Netflix and BBC iPlayer; colour management system; AMR 100Hz processing; Resolution+ processing; file playback from USB and home network

Final standings

WHY BUY A budget TV? The most obvious answer is that for many people blowing a fortune on a telly is not an option. But it's also the case that as 2013's TV ranges approach their end there's outstanding bargains to be found. Plus, of course, more and more of us are looking for TVs to go into second, third and even fourth rooms – and here price tends to be a priority...

We really did uncover some pretty extreme value in this group test. The features, and especially picture quality, offered by all our four featured screens have comfortably exceeded our expectations. In that regard, we can't imagine anyone being disappointed with any of them.

Putting the quartet in some sort of running order finds the Toshiba 40L6353 bringing up the rear. The problem for this set is not that it's bad. Not at all. Rather, it's not as good in picture quality terms as its Sony and Samsung rivals, and looks a bit expensive at its current pricing. If you see it discounted to around the £350 price level then it can be counted a seriously tantalising proposition, particularly as it offers enough connective options to cover all the bases.

In joint-second place is the Finlux 40F8073-T. This is the weakest all-round performer in the group test, but then it's also the cheapest by a considerable distance. With

its £300 ticket taken into account it begins to look like a pretty remarkable bargain, and it manages to out-Smart the Samsung UE42F5000 in some aspects.

The Samsung is no slouch, of course. It has value on its side – the quality of performance it delivers is ridiculously high for a set now available for £400. So if that represents the top-end of your available budget, and you have alternative ideas for VOD/catchup content (see *Smartening Up Your System*, right) then this is the TV to get.

Our winner today, therefore, is the Sony KDL-42W653. Like the Samsung, the provision of only two HDMI is a pain – especially if one is reserved for a set-top box – but its combination of strong picture quality and a good online content service make it a screen that could easily sit in your main room, as well as elsewhere in the house. It costs more than the competitors, but we'd suggest it's worth saving up for ■

SMARTENING UP YOUR SYSTEM



Call in the reinforcements: With some of our group test models falling short when it comes to Smart TV functionality, buyers should remember that external dedicated 'Smart upgraders' are growing in popularity – and coming down in price. You can spend less than £50 and get great-looking platforms that extend your VOD/app options considerably. You just need to reserve an HDMI slot on your TV.

Ready to Roku: The US firm Roku is building a fanbase in the UK, courtesy of its diminutive media streamers that offer simplistic operation and oodles of worthwhile content – including music platforms like Spotify and Rdio, VOD services like Netflix and Crackle and plenty of niche apps. Options include the flagship Roku 3, which provides a 1080p output, Ethernet as well as Wi-Fi connection and a useful headphone output on the remote control; and the new Roku Streaming Stick, which plumbs straight into a flatscreen's HDMI input. Alternatively, Sky's NOW TV box is based on the previous Roku LT player hardware, and is available for only £10. It does, however, miss out on some of the VOD channels that rival Sky.

Get Googling: Another new option is Google's Chromecast (pictured), freshly launched in the UK with a £30 tag. Similar to Roku's Streaming Stick, it's controlled via a smart device (no remote here) and potentially offers a multitude of apps via Google's Android service.

HCC VERDICT



Finlux 40F8073-T

→ £300 Approx
→ www.finluxdirect.com
→ Tel: 0845 459 5282

HIGHS: Affordable; decent pictures for its money; Smart TV features

LOWS: Rather flimsy audio; some noise over fine detail

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE42F5000

→ £400 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Outstanding value; good performance for its price; flexible picture controls

LOWS: No Smart portal; only two HDMI; only one USB

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Sony KDL-42W653

→ £480 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
→ Tel: 0845 6000 124

HIGHS: Terrific, contrast-rich pictures; strong online content service; compact, well-made design

LOWS: Relatively expensive; only two HDMI inputs

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HCC VERDICT



Toshiba 40L6353

→ £450 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk
→ Tel: 0871 495 0730

HIGHS: Solid all-round performance; reasonable Smart TV support; attractive design; four HDMI

LOWS: A tad expensive; unhelpful picture presets; sluggish menus

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Fuss-free film fun

Philips reinvents the ultra short-throw projector with the versatile HDP1590 'Screeneo'. Bigscreen believer **Steve May** mostly likes what he sees

IS THE ULTRA short-throw projector finally about to storm the home entertainment market? A staple of corporates and education, their ability to cast a huge image when placed close to a wall, rather than rely on a long throw and screen, would seem to make them ideal for domestic applications. Other brands have

hinted as much – LG has touted its prohibitively expensive Hecto laser projector Stateside, while Sony recently presented 4K short-throw projection as a home-of-tomorrow concept. At £1,500, the Philips LED DLP-powered Screeneo is a rather more real-world proposition.

The HDP1590 comes in a carry bag and sports a modern aesthetic. Indeed, it looks rather like a large Bluetooth sound system. Despite the compact form factor it offers much the same functionality as a connected TV. There's an integrated TV tuner, Smart portal and media playback.

Wall-facing connectivity includes two HDMI, a digital audio output, twin USBs, a pair of stereo phono inputs, Ethernet, PC VGA connector and 12V trigger. Slide down the front-facing Philips logo and you'll find an additional HDMI input, plus SD card reader, USB, headphone jack and focus wheel. The projector even offers Bluetooth streaming and has integrated Wi-Fi.

Depending on its distance from the wall, the Screeneo will throw an image 50-100in across. Setup takes just a few minutes: sit it low, positioned some 10-45cm from a wall, and power it up. Outside of simple keystone correction, there's little image manipulation offered

or required. Alternatively, it can be ceiling-mounted and the image inverted.

While not excessively bright, the Screeneo performs well in moderate levels of ambient light and positively glows in full blackout conditions. Colours are rich and impactful. However, resolution is limited to 720p (actually 1,280 x 800). This makes it a bit of a non-starter for next-gen gamers and proper home cinema. Even worse, the DVB tuner is standard-def only and looks pretty rough at this size. Things improve considerably if you feed in an HD set-top box or Blu-ray, and it performs well with dimensional BDs – there's very little overt crosstalk. One pair of active glasses are included in the box.

Both on a network and from USB, the projector supports a wide variety of video files, including MKV, MPEG, AVI and MOV. Audio support is similarly extensive and includes FLAC. You can also mirror smartphone content using Miracast. Interestingly, the HDP1590 actually uses a version of the Android OS and comes preloaded with YouTube, a web browser and Office. An onboard sound system, rated at 26W, is surprisingly decent.

So close to the mark

Overall, the Screeneo can be considered a lot of fun. While its limited resolution and basic DVB tuner rule it out as a primary display device, it's easy to imagine it in an entertainment den or kids bedroom, or being called upon for big event screenings. Philips has got the form factor and Smart stuff spot on, it just needs to fine-tune the specification ■

The Screeneo is designed for rooms where a traditional PJ is a no-go



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active Shutter (one pair of glasses supplied)
4K: No. 1,280 x 800 (720p)
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; phono stereo input; Ethernet; PC VGA; optical digital output; 12V trigger; 3 x USB; SD card
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 100,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 335(w) x 280(d) x 140(h)mm
WEIGHT: 5kg
FEATURES: DLP LED projector; 26W built-in audio system; 30,000 hours claimed lamp life; 25dB fan noise; keystone correction; built-in Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; Miracast; file playback from USB or over a network; web browser; YouTube; Android OS; ceiling mounting via image inversion; carry case; carry handle

HCC VERDICT



Philips HDP1590 Screeneo

→ £1,500 Approx → www.philips.co.uk
 → Tel: 0844 338 04 88

HIGHS: Extremely versatile; great Smart functionality; decent audio; decent 3D

LOWS: Limited resolution; standard-def DVB tuner; few connected apps

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Ultra short-throw LED projector/Smart device

POSITION:
Philips sole home PJ product

PEERS:
Epson EB485W; Vivitek D7180HD (both education models)



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Bass born in the USA

Subwoofer stalwart SVS is on a mission to get cinema fans to upgrade their bass bin.

Mark Craven reckons it shouldn't be too hard a sell



The SB-2000 marries a 12in driver to a 500W Sledge DSP amplifier

Installation is simple. There's no room EQ offered here, just phase, volume and crossover dials, plus in/outputs and an Auto Standby mode. The latter enables you to save on energy bills, but I found it a bit ponderous to wake up, so deactivated it.

Barnstormer

For the asking price, SVS's SB-2000 is a barnstormer. It provides hair-raising levels

PRICED AT £650, the SB-2000 is targeted at those eager to sample the delights of serious subwoofer technology without breaking the bank, or rearranging their furniture. A sealed design (SVS has a new ported woofer, too, the PB-2000), the American manufacturer claims it's 'compact'. I'd take that with a pinch of salt – it's not massive, but it's hardly dinky, either.

The SB-2000 uses both a new driver and a new power plant. The former is a front-firing 12in unit that, says the brand, benefits from some extensive R&D – more than 20 prototypes were apparently tested before the woofer design (incorporating the magnet, motor and spider assembly) was finalised. All this was done, I'm told, to find an equal partner to the freshly-conceived Sledge DSP amplifier, which is rated at 500W RMS

(1,100W peak) – a 200W increase on the previous model used in the SB-1000.

Style-wise, the SB-2000 suffers somewhat from black box-itis, although I like the black ash finish of our review sample (it's also available in gloss black). A curved grille is supplied.

of low-frequency fun – dropping deep while exhibiting fast feet – without any sign of cabinet stress. While some subs can draw attention to themselves for all the wrong reasons, the SB-2000 just sits there, doing its thing, and letting you enjoy its performance.

With *Homefront* (BD reviewed on p102) it adds tight, authentic weight and punch to the pounding fists as Jason Statham's hero takes a beating in a boathouse, and revels in the elongated, shifting bass note that corresponds to him being submerged in water. Its output is rich and inviting. With *Pacific Rim*, meanwhile, the footsteps of rampaging Kaiju and Jaegers become immensely scary occurrences, imbibed with an omnipotent low-end thud – when Gipsy Danger takes a swing at its otherworld foe in downtown Hong Kong City, the impact is seriously impressive, delivering the cinematic scale and presence that the filmmaker intended.

Switching over to music, the SVS proves equally adept at handling basslines, with its agility paying dividends. Again, its measured tonality comes to the fore here, and you can use the crossover control to optimise its interaction with your stereo speakers.

Essentially, there's nothing not to like about the SB-2000's performance. Of course, you can get bigger, deeper-sounding subs, but they will cost you more. For a small/medium-sized room, this is ideal ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 12in 'high-output' bass driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, front-firing
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 19Hz (-3dB)
ON-BOARD POWER: 500W Sledge DSP amp
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 360(w) x 360(h) x 430(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15.8kg
CONNECTIONS: LFE input; stereo line-level input; stereo line-level output

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 12in home cinema subwoofer

POSITION: Middle one of three sealed woofers; SVS also offers ported and cylinder designs

PEERS: REL T-9; Velodyne EQ-Max 12;

HCC VERDICT

SVS SB-2000

→ £650 Approx → www.karma-av.co.uk

→ Tel: 01423 358 846

HIGHS: Excellent value for money; quick, agile performer; impressive low-end extension; easy to setup

LOWS: Auto Standby mode best left off; not as compact as you might wish

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Home thinema!

Is the Marantz NR1604 the last great hope for populist home cinema? **Steve May** ponders the consequences of evolution...

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Lounge lizard AV receiver with network talents

POSITION:
The better specified of Marantz's two slim-line models

PEERS:
Pioneer VSX-S510;
Sony STR-DN1040

IF TRADITIONAL HOME cinema is to flourish, it needs AV receivers like the Marantz NR1604. It's no secret that real-world consumers have fallen out of love with the surround sound behemoths of yesteryear – incredible hulks just don't cut it anymore (unless they're green gamma-soaked scientists). Home audio has downsized dramatically, and AVRs have been slow to follow suit. Just as well then, that this third iteration of Marantz's slim-line NR models is, simply put, the best yet. When it comes to form, functionality and outright fun the NR1604 pretty much nails it.

It goes without saying that by its nature this style of receiver isn't so much about reckless performance, as usability (an often ignored phrase in the hedonistic world of home theatre). The dinosaur, it seems, is evolving.

Chip off the old block

Cosmetically, the NR1604 looks much the same as its slim forebears, with distinctive Marantz fascia moulding. The display is legible from a distance and connectivity reasonable. There are six HDMI inputs (actually seven, but one of the rears is a mirror of one on the fascia) and a single output, augmented by a host of assignable analogue and digital inputs.

There are two component inputs, phono AV, a trio of stereo connectors and optical/coaxial digital inputs. The fascia USB is optimised for iOS device playback but can stream music files from any connected USB thumb drive.

There's also a second zone stereo phono output, Ethernet connection and M-XPoort accessory dock (use for the RX-101 Bluetooth adaptor). The receiver will support 4K passthrough, should you add a 3,840 x 2,160 source at some point. This is a 7.1 design, but if you don't need the additional rears, or 4K future-proofing, it's probably worth considering the NR1504, a more affordable 5.1 alternative.

Setup couldn't be simpler. Indeed, the first thing you see when you power up is the graphical setup assistant, which will hold your hand and mop your brow as you fine-tune the AVR. Covering everything from speaker configuration to inputs, the experience is newbie-friendly; you're also invited to instigate Audyssey calibration at this point.

Marantz has also improved the logic of its UI, with some of the obfuscation of previous models seemingly sorted.

It may lack the bulk of a Jurassic AVR, but there's no shortage of thrills to be had. In full-flight 7.1 mode the NR1604 is text-book immersive. Image steering is coherent and the



Hopefully, Marantz's zapper won't mystify non-techie users



main soundstage suitably spacious. You will, however, probably end up nudging the Audyssey settings. In terms of speaker location and basic calibration, the entry-level MultiEQ system here does a reasonable job. The process allows up to six seating positions to be mic'd and applies Adaptive Low Frequency

'When it comes to form, functionality and outright fun the Marantz NR1604 pretty much nails it'

Correction along with crossover, delays and levels. Filter resolution is basic, a reflection of the limited DSP processing power onboard.

By default the system also engages Dynamic Volume and Dynamic EQ, both of which are a debatable benefit. When these settings are turned off, the soundstage issues a sigh of relief. You can, of course, manually set crossovers and level. If you know how to tickle your own enclosures, great results can be gleaned.

Officially rated at 50W-per-channel (into eight Ohms) this is not a volume monster.

Marantz still won't pull the plug on component video



Crank it too high and the soundstage hardens and becomes a bit thumpy. In the average living room, though, there's more than enough welly on tap to keep *Gravity* in orbit. The opening sequence in *Fast & Furious 6* is a good litmus test for any system. When the duelling cars shift gears, the best sound systems deliver rapid, concussive acceleration. The NR1604 doesn't manage that, but this is no criticism. You need to look much higher up the price ladder, perhaps at the brand's SR line, to find those kind of driving thrills. It does, however, provide an engaging ride in the passenger seat.

And in terms of multichannel atmosphere this receiver doesn't miss a beat. *Nanny McPhee* may not be an HCC demo regular, but it's rich in broadly-painted ambience that this Marantz magically recreates.

Naturally, the NR1604 provides all the regular codec support and post-processing modes available, from lossless to DD 5.1 EX, in addition to a modicum of DSP modality. But there are more important niceties which endear this receiver to family usage, such as HDMI passthrough. You can leave a Sky+HD box, for instance, tethered to the receiver, and other family members can continue to use it without having to contend with activating the AVR.

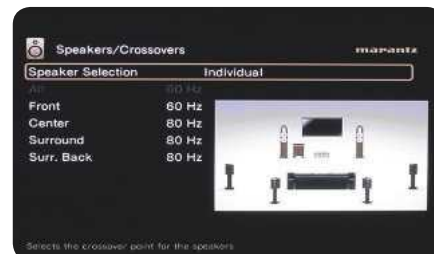
The receiver also plays ball on a network. Pop it onto a LAN and you can listen to internet radio, play Spotify or stream music from a NAS or PC. File support covers MP3, FLAC, WAV, AAC and WMA. The receiver is also AirPlay compatible for iOS owners.

As a two-channel amplifier the NR1604 is on the right side of polite. It's more BRITs than baroque, but has an articulate, poppy sensibility.

Up to the task

Marantz has got everything just about right with this network-friendly, slinky AVR. If you don't want a home cinema monster, but need a well-specified multichannel hub able to make the most of set-top boxes and Blu-ray – and savvy enough for file server and internet streaming – it's well worth consideration. There's equal lashings of common sense and pucker high-fidelity DNA on offer here. And if you doubt its prowess, shoot it out against any High Street all-in-one package. This non-Hulk will smash it ■

ON THE MENU



→ The NR1604 sports unfussy menus with clearly legible text and a fairly painless structure. A graphical setup assistant helps the uninitiated get their system up and running; tech-savvy buyers can make use of various tweaks and adjustments

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Pro-Logic IIx, Dolby Digital EX

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And DTS-ES, DTS 96/24

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):

7 x 50W (20Hz-20kHz, 0.08% THD, two-

channels, 8 Ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Second zone, audio only

AV INPUTS: 3 x composite; 3 x analogue stereo,

2 x digital audio (one optical, one coaxial)

HDMI: 6 (+1) x inputs; 1 x output

VIDEO UPSCALING: 1080p

COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 2 x inputs; 1 x output

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 105(d) x 367(h)mm

WEIGHT: 8.4kg

ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; Audyssey MultiEQ with Dynamic Volume/Dynamic EQ; Spotify; vTuner internet radio; FM tuner; DLNA media streaming, AirPlay; M-XPport; USB input for file playback/iPod/iPhone; Bluetooth via RX101 adaptor; setup assistant; biamping; Pure Direct and Compressed Audio Enhancer

HCC VERDICT



Marantz NR1604

→ £550 Approx → www.marantz.co.uk

→ Tel: 0289 0279830

HIGHS: Great usability; solid multichannel performance; adept music streaming; HDMI passthrough

LOWS: Not suitable for larger theatre rooms; limited dynamics; Audyssey calibration a bit disappointing; no Wi-Fi

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Two birds. One stone

Adrian Justins discovers these desktop Bluetooth speakers hook into his TV, too

USING A PAIR of active desktop speakers with a TV means the speakers are better disposed for listening to music, especially if they support wireless audio streaming. The MR1 is one such model that fits the bill, with a 20W amplifier, apt-X compatible Bluetooth and a 3.5mm input that can hook up to a TV's headphone output. The rear panel also sports a subwoofer out.

Design and build quality are good, with the cabinets available in either solid walnut, black gloss or white gloss finishes. Behind the fine mesh grille are two bespoke drivers, a long-throw 3in woofer and a 20mm tweeter, both employing neodymium magnet systems.

A dinky six-button, low-profile remote makes it easy to power up, select the source and change volume, with a discrete LED within the volume control on the right speaker



glowing different colours or blinking according to its status. Alternatively, you can use your TV's own remote to vary the volume. The speakers automatically reactivate or enter sleep when used with a TV.

Bluetooth beauties

The MR1 is a knockout with Bluetooth music, with excellent stereo imaging and a rich, warm

Walnut and black gloss finishes are also available

sound that excels across the dynamic range. Bass is especially rewarding; Gregory Porter's *Hey Laura*, for example, sounding simply sublime. The Ruarks work well with a TV, too, but are a tad too bassy, and using the headphone output on a Samsung 46F8000 locked the sound mode to Standard so there was no means of altering the EQ. Still, Blu-rays, such as *Oblivion*, benefit from punch and offer good dialogue clarity. Overall, these speakers mix design and performance to good effect ■

HCC VERDICT

Ruark MR1 → £300

Overall ★★★★★

PANASONIC SC-HTB65 → Approx £150

Affordable audio upgrade

This soundbar certainly looks swish, but does its performance impress **Danny Phillips**?



The Panasonic can be setup flat or on its side

THE SC-HTB65 IS one of Panasonic's affordable soundbars, eschewing the 3.1 split-speaker shenanigans of the pricier SC-HTB770 for a simple single-box design. But there is one cool twist – you can install it vertically on the wall or flat on a tabletop, and a built-in sensor detects which way up it's placed and adjusts the sound output accordingly.

The design includes an eye-catching silver finish with rounded edges and brush-effect panels. It's slim too, which means it won't look ungainly hanging under your wall-mounted TV. Panasonic says its size is aimed at sets between 42in and 50in.

Laid flat on a tabletop it's equally stylish, although you can't see the front lights from the sofa, so you won't know which sound modes

and inputs are selected. Rear sockets include optical and analogue inputs but no HDMI's.

On-board power is quoted at 90W, and there's built-in Dolby Digital and DTS decoding, alongside Pro-Logic II and Virtual Speaker. Panasonic's 3D Surround aims to expand the soundfield, plus there's a dialogue enhancer and five sound presets. The absence of Bluetooth is a downer, but can probably still be forgiven at this price – and some people simply won't have any use for it anyway.

Pump up the volume

In action the SC-HTB65 conjures up a loud, attacking sound that'll put any TV to shame, but it's not particularly well endowed in the bass department – movie action scenes lack the low-end punch and depth offered by the

best soundbars. This emphasis on midrange and treble makes it sound bright, especially at louder volumes.

But to its credit, the SC-HTB65 offers good detail and clear dialogue, perhaps making it better suited to TV viewing than BDs.

Overall this is a decent soundbar with a stylish design and some useful audio features, but if bass is your bag then you'll want to check out the competition ■

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTB65 → £150

Overall ★★★★★

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Debut soundbar plays it safe

Adrian Justins auditions a TV audio solution from a brand with considerable sonic heritage

WHARFEDALE HAS BEEN making speakers for over 80 years but the Vista 100 is the company's first dabble in the soundbar market. Although it doesn't have a subwoofer, for the bargain price of £150 it has a decent array of features, including six drivers, 60W power output, Bluetooth audio streaming (but not CD-quality apt-x), plus optical, coaxial, stereo phono and a 3.5mm line input. Furthermore, Wharfedale claims that the Vista 100's Sonic Emotion Absolute 3D technology will permeate every inch of your room in the guise of three EQ presets (Game, Movie and Music), which can be further optimised by separately tweaking the bass and treble levels.

When viewed close up and from above the Vista 100 has more pleasing curves than a ripe peach, but looks flat and square from directly opposite. Its shape accommodates a conveniently recessed jack pack and it can be wall-mounted simply by hooking it on to two screws. A row of basic touch-sensitive controls



adorns the top surface, with more complex operation offered by the Mars-bar sized remote control. As with a lot of budget 'bars there's no display window, but 2cm-high blue letters appear behind the grille when switched on. It's not the most pleasing display to read but is legible.

Where bass is expendable

With Blu-rays, the Vista 100 seems overwhelmed by high-octane soundtracks such as *The Expendables 2*, where the explosions fall utterly flat. It's much happier with less complex material, and EQ modes aside, which disperse sound at the cost of diluting the mid-range, the Vista 100 does

The Vista 100 claims 60W of onboard power

an excellent job at improving dialogue-based material such as Sky News or TV dramas. Music streamed via Bluetooth is enjoyable enough, with a clean delivery, but low-frequencies feel a touch disconnected ■

HCC VERDICT

Wharfedale Vista 100 → £150

Overall ★★★★★

EOPS TECH NOISEZERO → Approx £90

Headphones that hate noise

Ed Selley is impressed by these cans' isolating tech, but finds fault elsewhere

IN THE WORLD of earphones, the use of Comply – a viscoelastic polyurethane foam trademarked and sold as a product in its own right – is increasingly widespread. This natty material allows for excellent noise isolation, as the foam expands into your ear canal. Now, EOps Tech has taken Comply and applied it to over-ear headphones.

The Noisezeroes are equipped with large Comply pads that expand when warm to better fit your ears. They feel a little odd, though – slightly clammy when cold and prone to leaving you with hot ears once warmed up. Internally, the Noisezeroes make use of a 40mm driver for midbass and low-end, while a coaxial mounted tweeter handles the high stuff. A choice of colours are available and the general build is usefully solid.

Keeping the outside, outside

In use, these cans deliver on the promise of isolation admirably. The earpads keep the outside world at bay and this also means that you don't find yourself driving them hard to leave external noise at the door. This is handy, because the

EOps Tech design is not that sensitive and requires a reasonable amount of power to achieve decent levels – although most tablets should be up to the task.

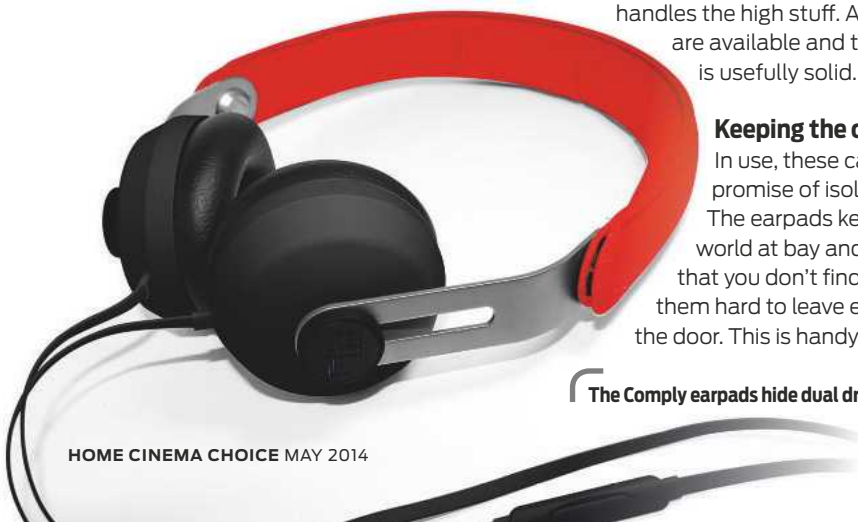
The crossover between the two drivers is imperceptible and detail and tonality are good. By the same token, for a speaker with dual drivers, the Noisezeroes don't feel especially potent at either end of the frequency range, and the headband pressure means those Comply earpads are squeezed onto your head. For use on the move this is a capable choice but it isn't a true all-rounder, and I wish they were more comfortable, too ■

HCC VERDICT

EOps Tech Noisezero → £90

Overall ★★★★★

The Comply earpads hide dual drivers



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*1 Typical lamp life achieved through testing. Will vary according to operational use and environmental conditions

Trans Network Express

Martin Pipe examines a feature-packed addition to Synology's NAS stable, and runs the rule over its hardware-powered AV transcoding

SYNOLOGY'S DS214PLAY OFFERS

all of the standard NAS functionality (including mobile device access and RAID configuration), plus the company's powerful DSM operating system and the ability to download apps that expand the unit's versatility. But the icing on the cake is audio/video transcoding, which is made possible by a dual-core processor and hardware-acceleration. Typically, trying to play something that your playback device can't handle will reward you with stubborn rejection or even a crash. The DS214play sidesteps this by converting, on-the-fly, the selected file into something that your player can cope with.

Its two drive-bays can accept 2.5in or 3.5in SATA hard drives. The Synology also boasts an SD card slot for direct copying of photos/video, plus USB/eSATA ports that facilitate the connection of external drives (for backup), Bluetooth dongles and digital TV tuners.

Time to fly

When transcoding, video resolutions of up to 1080p are covered. Sadly, material with DTS audio (disc-originated, usually) refuses to stream outright.

Licensing issues are to blame, apparently.

A free script that converts DTS tracks into compatible ones is available, though. An alternative is to use traditional network file access, as supported by many modern streamers. This will enable direct playback of content



on such kit, with DTS soundtracks passed through to AV systems unchanged. It's probably worth using this when you can, as the DS214play transcodes even compatible soundtracks (e.g., Dolby Digital 5.1) into stereo MP3! ISO disc images, menus and all, would also be possible.

Streaming to an Android 'phone via the free DS Video app was problem-free; transcoded video looked crisp and lacked glitches or lip-sync issues. However, transcoding didn't work with some of my networked players, including a Pinnacle ShowCenter (sound but no pictures) and one built into a 2009-era Samsung smart TV (pictures but no sound).

Nor could I get it to stream video to a Windows 7 PC running Media Player. Although content was listed, selecting a file for playback had no effect. Using Cyberlink's DLNA-capable PowerDVD 13 Ultra software proved more successful – I was able to confirm that a 'ripped' BD file was being converted from just under 30Mbps to a network-friendlier 6Mbps, with surprisingly minimal loss of visual quality.

The DS214play works exceptionally well as a NAS. It's versatile, well-connected and offers fast data throughput, and even caters for the proprietary iTunes and Squeezebox protocols. However, my experience shows there's no guarantee that the transcoding function will work with older players. When it does work, though, performance is excellent ■

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Not included. Supports up to two 2.5in or 3.5in drives – capacities up to 5TB each

CONNECTIONS: SD slot; USB 2.0; Ethernet; 2 x USB 3.0; eSATA

DIMENSIONS: 108(w) x 165(h) x 233.2(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.3kg (without HDDs)

FEATURES: On-the-fly hardware-accelerated Full HD video transcoding (H.264 (AVC), MPEG-4 Part 2, MPEG-2, VC-1); Synology DSM (DiskStation Manager) operating system with support for feature-software 'plugins'; DLNA-certified media server; dual-core Intel Atom CPU; 1GB RAM; transfer speeds of 111Mbps (reading) and 101Mbps (write); screwless drive-bay design; hot-swappable drive support

AV INFO

PRODUCT: NAS device with on-the-fly AV transcoding

POSITION: One of a plethora of DS-range products

PEERS: Iomega StorCenter ix2-200; Buffalo LinkStation 220

HCC VERDICT

Synology DS214play

→ £285 Approx → www.synology.com
→ Tel: 01908 587422

HIGHS: Incredible app-based versatility; cloud and internet functionality; wizard-driven web interface for ease of configuration

LOWES: Transcoding compatibility a bit hit-and-miss; some codecs (e.g., DTS) not supported; conversion anathema to purists

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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Surround sound style

Harman/Kardon's AVR 171 is probably the best-looking AVR on the market. **Danny Phillips** hopes its features and performance can make the same impression

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
7.2-channel
AV receiver with
Bluetooth

POSITION:
Sits above £300
AVR 131 and £380
AVR 151

PEERS:
Marantz SR6008;
Pioneer VSX-923;
Onkyo TX-NR626

HARMAN/KARDON STEPS INTO the crowded, competitive midrange receiver market with the AVR 171, a product packed with compelling cutting-edge features and an impressive specification.

The 7.2-channel AVR 171 sits at the top of Harman's latest range, above two 5.1 models – the AVR 131 (£300) and the AVR 151 (£380). Unusually for an AV receiver, it's a thing of beauty, side-stepping the hard, boxy lines of most rivals for a softer, more elegant look with curved edges and a gloss-black fascia. The bodywork is surprisingly light and compact too, thanks to a slimmed-down power supply.

Also refreshing is the almost complete lack of clutter. The thin buttons are swallowed up by the black finish and sockets are hidden behind a removable flap. A ring of bright light surrounding the flush volume dial draws your attention, but this, along with the easy-to-read LED display, can be dimmed or turned off.

Behind the flap are a headphone socket (which doubles as an input for the setup mic) and a USB port – the latter can be used to play music from flash drives and Apple

devices. All of the AV inputs are located on the back, which doesn't help if you want to quickly plug in a mobile device.

The rear selection is okay for the money – you get six HDMI inputs, all of which support 3D and 4K passthrough. Another one also supports MHL, allowing you to view HD content from Android smartphones and tablets. There are two HDMI outputs – one of which supports ARC. A lone coaxial and two optical inputs complete the digital contingent; analogue jacks include Zone 2 audio and twin subwoofer outs.

Network connectivity is Ethernet-only (whereas many rivals are offering onboard Wi-Fi at this level), but built-in Bluetooth makes it easy to beam music wirelessly. Logged onto your network, the AVR 171 can stream music via AirPlay or DLNA 1.5, or access internet radio stations through the vTuner portal. It works well in all cases, pulling music from connected servers with minimal fuss.

On the cinema side, it claims 100W into each of its seven channels and, naturally, decodes Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio. In addition, proprietary Natural Sound



The handset design isn't as intuitive as we'd like



Processing (NSP) aims to create a 'surround listening space' from two-channel sources.

The setup wheels are greased by EzSet/EQ III, an auto calibration system that sets volume, speaker delay and EQ for you via the supplied microphone and test tones. It's relatively quick, and checking the results afterwards reveals accurate distance settings and sensible volume levels.

In need of a touch up

AV receiver menus aren't pretty at the best of times, but the AVR 171's are particularly primitive, plonking a simple list of options over the picture. The jagged white text and tiny icons are like a throwback to another era, but at least the layout is easy to follow, and there's very little it doesn't let you tweak, including surround mode parameters, manual speaker configuration and Zone 2 settings.

The remote isn't great – the all-important volume controls are buried at the bottom amid a bunch of similar looking buttons, and all of the keys have a sticky, unresponsive feel unbefitting a receiver at this price. You're better off with the remote app for Android and iOS devices. Slick, attractive and practical, it makes day-to-day control a breeze.

When faced with *Cloverfield*'s wonderfully raucous DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack, the

AVR 171 tackles the carnage head-on. Or head-off as the case may be, because when the monster sends the Statue of Liberty's severed bonce careering down a New York street, you get an immediate sense of the Harman's remarkable power and punch.

As it clatters into the side of a building and rolls down the road, each impact is accompanied by a forceful crunch and an explosive bass 'whomp' that slams right through your gut. By the time the beast starts smashing up the bridge, you're ducking for cover from the crunch of splitting concrete and whipping bridge wires. This level of vigour and muscle makes the AVR 171 such a compelling performer and puts it up there with superb power-purveyors like the Pioneer VSX-923 and Onkyo TX-NR626.

The AVR 171 also demonstrates top-drawer organisation, laser-guided effects placement and swift steering. As the army storms down the street shooting at the beast, bullets zip across the soundstage at breakneck speed and there's real fizz to the machine guns and missiles. The attack on the mids and highs is a touch bright but not wince-inducing.

There's also a terrific sense of scale when the monster lumbers away in the distance. Its thumping footsteps and booming roars have heft and depth.

It's not all about power though – the AVR 171 also handles quieter, atmospheric stuff competently. As the group travel through the underground tunnel, you can hear the echoes bouncing gently off the walls and the rustle as a horde of rats scurry past them. Voices are also clear and life-like.

That said, if you're looking for sparkling levels of subtlety and transparency then you might want to check out something like the Marantz SR6008, which has a laid back but more refined and informative sound.

Music fans won't feel let down. This stylish AVR draws plenty of detail from hi-res files and CDs and backs it up with head-nodding rhythms and terrific vocal clarity.

A job on its hands

The AVR 171 is up against stiff competition, and its antiquated operating system, Wi-Fi no-show and a lack of sonic subtlety compared with some rivals counts against it. However, there's no arguing with its stunning looks and thrilling sound ■

ON THE MENU

→ The AVR 171 looks great on your rack, but its user interface is less impressive on your display. Low-res text and smallscale icons do the job, but it's hardly the inviting, stylish experience that buyers of this modern receiver may expect

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Digital EX, Pro-Logic IIz

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. And DTS Neo:6

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 100W (1kHz, 0.9% THD, two-channel, 8 ohms)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Zone 2 audio

AV INPUTS: 2 x composite; 3 x digital audio (2 x optical and 1 x coaxial); 2 x analogue stereo

HDMI: Yes. 6 x inputs; 2 x outputs

VIDEO UPSCALING: No

COMPONENT VIDEO: No

DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 121(h) x 300(d)mm

WEIGHT: 5.1kg

ALSO FEATURING: Apple AirPlay; Bluetooth; DLNA 1.5; vTuner; Harman TrueStream; MHL; ARC; dual subwoofer outputs; EzSet/EQ III auto setup; Android/iOS remote app; Natural Sound Processing (NSP); FM/AM tuner; 3D and 4K passthrough

HCC VERDICT



Harman/Kardon AVR 171

→ £500 Approx → www.harmankardon.co.uk
→ Tel: 0289 0279830

HIGHS: Impressive scale, dynamics and organisation; chic design; generous features for the asking price

LOWS: Sacrifices subtlety for out-and-out thrills; clunky remote; old-school onscreen menus; MHL input on rear

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The MHL HDMI input is on the rear. D'Oh!





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Mark Craven isn't a big fan of TV series *Veronica Mars*, but he's a fan of the funding model that's led to its resurrection on the silver screen. Now he wants the trend to continue

AWAY FROM 4K video, hi-res audio, Smart TV and ever more elaborate speaker configurations, 2014 is also shaping up to be the year of 'crowdfunding'. This practice, whereby projects/products are funded by smallscale donations from the public masses – in return for actually seeing the idea becoming real – has been making headlines, helped by a successful feature film return for a cancelled TV show, and a music legend's drive for a better standard of audio. Both are intriguing.

The music legend is Neil Young, still rocking aged 68. In 2012, the singer/songwriter announced his ambition to launch a hi-res music ecosystem called Pono (incorporating a portable digital music player and online download store) to challenge the ubiquitous MP3 – it will use 24-bit PCM. Far from being the pipe-dream of a celebrity muso, Pono has gained significant traction, including the support of major record labels and music industry figures. And in March this year, it was launched on Kickstarter, the most famous of all crowdfunding sites.

What happened next is extraordinary – backers quickly piled in, ensuring the \$800,000 target (a figure that, it seems, was needed to put the PonoPlayer into full production after prototypes were finalised) was hit in only two days. At the time of writing, over \$4m has been pledged with 28 days still to go. **For those backers that donated, they can now sit back and know that the PonoPlayer is real**, and that they'll get their hands on the gizmo this October.

Around the same time as the Pono success story, fans of the cult teen detective series *Veronica Mars* were whooping with joy after the sleuth returned (at the cinema, not on the gogglebox) thanks to the crowdfunding model. With writer/producer Rob Thomas asking for \$2m to get his then unwanted

feature-length script into production, the show's loyal army of 'marshmallows' (fans, to you and I) stumped up the readies in just 10 hours. The project eventually received over \$5m, and has already grabbed \$2m at the US box office, meaning the producers and distributors are well on the way to end up quids in from a project that they didn't invest in. (Although Warner's decision to use the much-derided UltraViolet platform to fulfil its obligations to those who purchased download rights met with considerable backlash – not least among those who had expected to be able to grab the film on iTunes).

What can we kickstart next?

So now I'm looking at home cinema and wondering what else can benefit from the crowdfunding model. Could it be employed by the software industry to bring even more titles to Blu-ray? Yes, it could – and it already is: late last year Arrow Films used Kickstarter to collect the £20,000 it deemed necessary to complete a 2K restoration of Walerian Borowczyk's 1968 drama *Goto, l'île d'amour*. All the backers will receive a BD copy of the movie – and those who dug extra deep in their pockets will see their name credited in the booklet.

Now, I'll admit I know little about licensing issues, distribution costs and the other facets of being a software label, but this seems like a great way for independents to continue to find fans and possibly reduce their risks. Crowdfunding might just be the best way for our star letter-writer (see p84) to get his beloved Cheech and Chong flick in HD – and I'll get my wallet out right now for anyone who can magic up a decent-looking *Predator* Blu-ray ■

What movie/TV show are you still waiting for on Blu-ray?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

If high school private investigators are making a comeback, **Mark Craven** is looking forward to the long-rumoured Hardy Boys movie





FILM FANATIC

Batman, Spider-Man and Captain America are all well and good, but, wonders **Anton van Beek**, why are female superheroes so poorly represented at the movies?

UNLESS YOU'RE ONE of those odd people who thinks that *Film Fanatic* is the best part of *HCC* and turn straight to this page whenever you pick up a new issue (yeah, right – Ed), I'm going to presume that you've already seen our guide to 'Cinema's Greatest Superheroes'. If so, you will probably have noticed something pretty significant. That's right, there's not a single lady to be seen.

Now, having been one of the key participants in determining the list of characters that appear in the feature, I want to make it very clear that we didn't go out of our way to exclude female superheroes. In fact, as soon as the all-male bias started to become apparent, I started actively looking for suitable female characters we might have missed.

Unfortunately, it just wasn't to be. From *Rogue* to *Black Widow*, *Storm* to *Silk Spectre*, it became apparent that the majority of female superheroes on film are parts of ensemble casts, and are almost entirely subordinate – in story terms – to their male crime-fighting brethren. As for those who have had their own solo films... well, *Elektra* sucked, didn't it?

Admittedly, the comic book landscape has always been dominated by male characters when it comes to the superhero genre, although in recent years, the two biggest publishers in the market, Marvel and DC, have taken major steps towards redressing the balance. Yet this trend does not appear to have carried over to Hollywood.

Indeed, the movie industry's inability to get to grips with female superheroes is highlighted by the bigscreen plight of surely the most famous female cape-wearer of them all: Wonder Woman.

Mainstream recognition

As well as being one of DC's 'Big Three' heroes alongside Batman and Superman, Wonder Woman

has enjoyed screen success in the past with the popular TV series starring Lynda Carter that ran from 1975 to 1979. In other words this is a comic book icon with genuine mainstream recognition – unlike, say, Green Lantern.

Towards the end of 2013 it was announced that Gal Godot had been hired to play Wonder Woman in Zack Snyder's upcoming *Batman vs Superman*. In other words, while Warner Bros has been making noises about bringing the Amazonian to the multiplex for years, it's only got as far as giving her a cameo role in a film about two established male heroes. And while Godot has signed a three-picture deal, one of these is undoubtedly for a *Justice League* film, so **I'm not betting on there being a solo film for Wonder Woman any time soon.**

Studios may be wary because the likes of *Supergirl* and *Catwoman* hardly set the box office alight. I'd argue that those films were failures not because they were about female superheroes, but because they were bloody awful movies. And, as for the belief that audiences simply won't accept female-led action/genre movies – any idiot who goes along with that line of thinking needs to take a look at the mountains of cash the *Hunger Games* franchise has been raking in. Or the *Alien* series, for that matter.

The problem is, I'm not the head of a major Hollywood studio, so my opinion doesn't count for much. Based on that, I predict we're more likely to see a stand-alone comic book film for a gun-toting raccoon (Marvel's Rocket, one of the Guardians of the Galaxy) than one for the most recognisable female superhero of them all ■

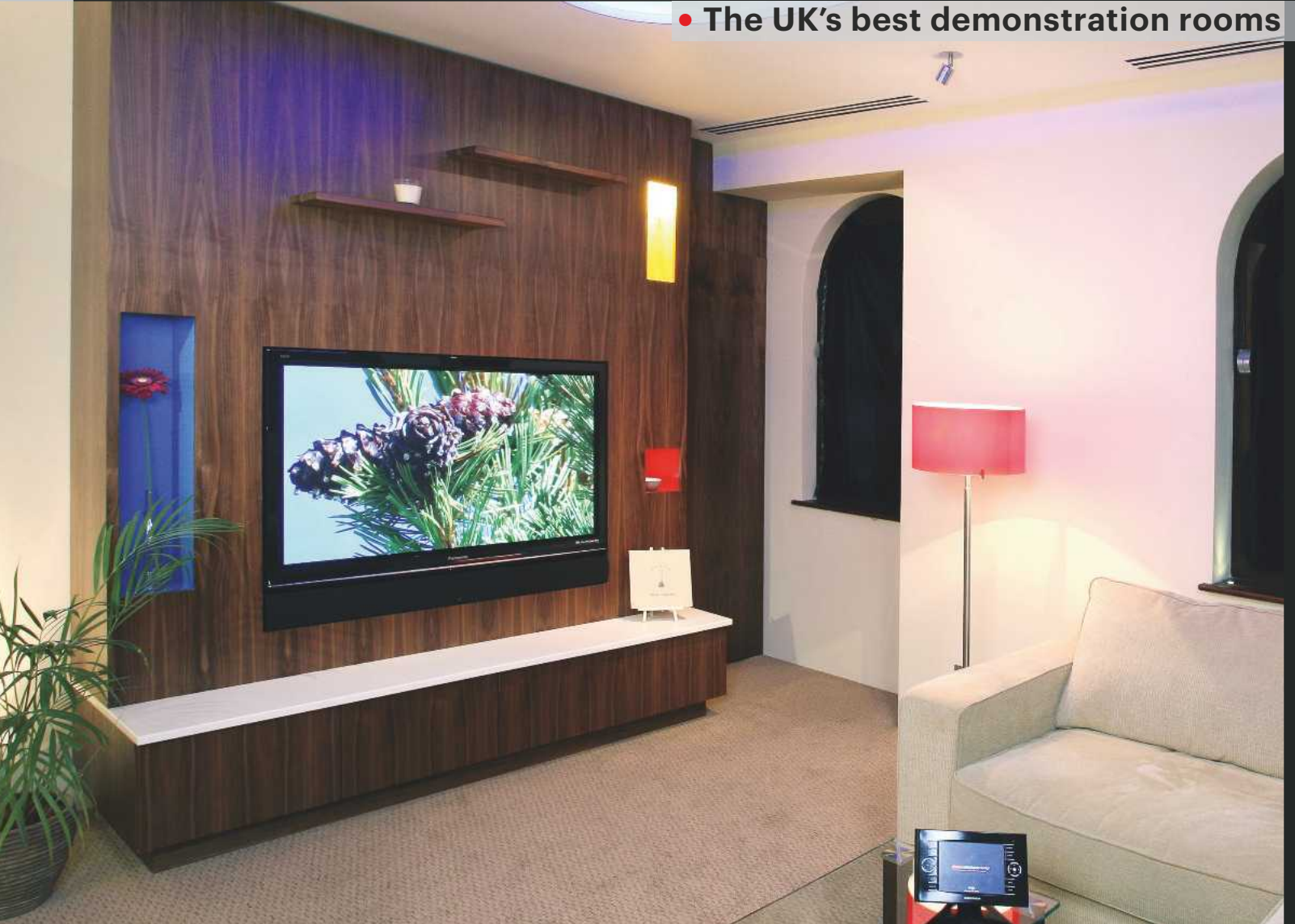
Which female superheroes would you like to see on film?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek is hoping for a live-action version of popular 'toon *The Raccoons*, maybe with Sir Patrick Stewart as evil aardvark Cyril Sneer



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Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology?
Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Downloads aren't for me

I'm sorry to hear Sainsbury's Entertainment is pulling out of disc media sales online and focusing on downloads. I know they say they'll still sell discs in store but, c'mon, let's face it, their choice is pretty pathetic, especially when it comes to Blu-ray. I called into my local Sainsbury's last week (and it's a big one) and they had what they consider 'Top 20' DVDs and only had a smattering of those titles available on Blu-ray. Haven't they heard the Blu-ray market is still growing?

I have been using Sainsbury's Entertainment quite a while now as they often undercut Amazon price-wise. I considered switching to downloads but Sainsbury's

Entertainment don't do HD (backwards step there), the sound is compressed and there's no 3D availability, so I quickly decided against it.

And, while on the subject of 3D, why do the platters still have to be so flipping expensive? Everyone says the uptake of 3D is poor but the studios/retailers have never really made the disc prices all that reasonable. I know – I've got 90 3D titles – but I generally wait till the prices drop. *The Croods 3D* is still £20+ yet the 2D Blu-ray can be had for £10! I know a lot of people with 3D televisions and they watch 3D regularly. They're not all AV-holics like me but often ask to borrow the new titles I've bought.
Ian Caslake, via email



Anton van Beek replies: I love 3D – can't get enough of it – but I agree that the cost of some discs doesn't help the format. Of course, it's typically because a 3D release also includes a separate 2D platter...

Sainsbury's Entertainment: no longer selling Blu-rays, just downloads

Blu-ray sales are growing (DVD sales are shrinking) but downloads are growing faster in year-on-year terms, and I'm

★ STAR LETTER...

There's a place for both downloads and physical discs!

Hi. I just read The Beek's column in my crisp new April issue. I agree with him that skipping certain movie releases on Blu-ray is just wrong for any movie fan and collector. But I do not believe that any of the studios have given up on Blu-ray. They still release all their films on DVD as well as BD.

I sometimes think the media creates these perceptions. Take that issue of *HCC* – emblazoned on the cover: 'Netflix 4K, the future of cinema'. That cover made me not want to buy this issue... When I saw '101 BDs You Must Own', I succumbed.

We are constantly bombarded about the death of physical media, by the media! I love a tangible thing for my money, not an imaginary thing out in some ether. CDs are still around, vinyl has come back, many people do

not want everything downloaded. There is a place for both. I won't rehash all the reasons BDs are better – real ownership, beautiful packaging, steelbooks, digibooks, collectors editions, etc – but what kind of broadband would you need for 4K? It is unreliable at the best of times.

In the magazine's *News x10* column, you mention a 10 per cent rise in BD sales in the UK. That is not a dying format. Long may it grow! Just search YouTube for 'Blu-ray collectors' and you will see there are thousands of people who love to collect BDs. Like home cinema it is a hobby and a love of films that brings us so much joy. What else are we going to put

on our shelves, if not books, CDs, records and BDs? They make a house a home, not a sterile place that only has a hub glowing in some cold corner.

Many people still don't get the advantages of BDs over DVDs



– hence DVDs are still selling – what will they make of 4K?

Okay, my rant is over. I am going to settle down and watch my own physical DVD of Cheech and Chong's *Up In Smoke*. Why is this classic not released on Blu-ray! I'll have a glass of wine and enjoy watching the boys mess with Stacey Keach's head.
Mike Powell, via email

Mark Craven replies: You obviously take disc collection very seriously, Mike, so have another one on us!

You, and many other letter writers recently, are all raising the same key point – we collect discs not only for quality (although that's a very serious consideration) but also because they are a tangible thing. You mention vinyl – LP

starting to see more and more titles being made available digitally in advance of their physical disc release. Studios have to do whatever they think is necessary to maximise revenues, but I wish BD fans were catered for first!

Tackling the Top 101

Does HCC suffer from inadvertent genre bias? No Bollywood, no classical music, no modern dance (unless you count *Singin' in the Rain*) and no live concerts in your 101 best Blu-ray choices? At the risk of laying myself open to debate, check out, in respective order, *Saawariya*, *Brandenburg Concertos 1-6* released by Medici Arts, *Amelia* by Edouard Lock and, controversially perhaps, *Aphrodite* by Kylie. All visually/aurally magnificent and personal favourites. While tastes differ I hope the next time you publish a list of must-have titles you try to cast the net a little wider even if you don't agree with my examples. *Bob Andersson, via email*

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the input Bob. Inadvertent genre bias? Possibly, but with the emphasis on 'inadvertent'! Our Top 101 was made up solely

collectors are probably some of the most devoted I've ever come across (even getting up in arms when IKEA announced it was discontinuing its perfect-for-12in-storage range of shelving), but film fans can be equally obsessive (in a good way). This is therefore yet another reason why we want a 4K disc standard!

As for the media's discussion of the death of physical media – we at HCC do our best to keep the frothing madness to a minimum!

Star letter-writer Mike Powell wins a copy of *Walking with Dinosaurs: The 3D Movie* on Blu-ray 3D, which is available to buy on April 14 from Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.



of feature films (with one documentary, *Samsara*) and we never considered any live concert titles. The reason for this? While we think we have seen enough Blu-ray movie releases since 2006 to have a good idea of what's good and what isn't, the same doesn't apply to concert discs. There doesn't seem to be the same drive from distributors to get music titles out for review, and we have enough trouble every issue whittling down the TV and film content to fit the Playback section.

So, thanks for the suggestions – we'll check them out. And if any other readers want to suggest their favourite concert BDs, we're all ears.

Tackling the Top 101 (again)

Your list was pretty good – the obvious omission was *Super 8*. It's signature train crash being a great reference point for testing your 5.1 system, not to mention its overall production values.

Ian Davies, via email

Mark Craven replies: Ah, yes, *Super 8*. This was on our shortlist until the very last minute, but was eventually discarded as we had *Cloverfield* in the list. Both movies are very similar thematically, but *Cloverfield* is our personal fave. And the *Super 8* soundtrack is a cracker – our

reviewer Adrian Justins never leaves home without it – but the mix on *Cloverfield* is no slouch either.

Tackling the Top 101 (still)

I have 26 of those chosen in your Top 101 – I would not anticipate that I will play them more than once with the odd exception, but I would like to add *3:10 to Yuma*, a typical Western of the type I used to enjoy as a young lad on a Saturday. The bullets 'ping' around my cinema in the attic, clear as a bell, really showing off my equipment. Another would be *Notting Hill* – a 'feelgood' film with humour, romance and two excellent actors in Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts. I will be in the minority with *The Sound of Music* – good story, excellent music. My favourite? The latest version of Russel Crowe's *Gladiator*. Magnificent.

I am not too keen on having too many in my collection just to show off my equipment – my audiences would get bored to death.

William Haydock, via email

Should I replace my power amp and processor?

I have a Myriad MPD 500G6 digital preamp/processor, a Myriad MA500 power amp (five-channel) and MA240 (two-channel) power amp. The trouble is I have no HDMI,

no networking and no HD sound. I think I have two options:

I was thinking of keeping the power amps and buying an Onkyo TX-NR807. (I have seen one on eBay for £299, manufacturer refurbished.) I can use my amps for the cinema room and the amps in the Onkyo for additional zones (kitchen, etc).

Or: sell the Myriad setup and buy the Onkyo TX-NR929 which you reviewed recently. Thoughts? *Pat Joyce, via email*

Richard Stevenson replies: You have quite a few options here but none of them are without compromise unless you can rustle up some more cash. Swapping your Myriad processor for a second-hand AVR that has pre-outs to drive your Myriad power amps would be a solid solution for integrating HDMI and HD audio. However, AVRs that are even a couple of years old, such as that Onkyo TX-NR807, are not >

CONTACT US...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

going to have the plethora of features and the niceties of current models, such as app control, MHL comparability, InstaPrevue and so on.

The main trouble is that the Myryad MA series power amps were fine-sounding devices with a rich and full-bodied performance that excelled with movies but absolutely rocked with two-channel stereo music. While selling the Myryad system and going for the Onkyo TX-NR929 would solve all your technical issues, adding HDMI, HD sound, networking and cutting-edge features, and give you top-notch home cinema sound, its performance with stereo music might not be up to the standard of your current Myryad arrangement.

Perhaps the best all-round solution is something in between your two scenarios. If you sell the Myryad 500G6 and MA500 together they will make a nice system for someone looking for a purist five-channel pre-power



Onkyo's TX-NR929 offers multichannel pre-outs, so you can partner it with a dedicated power amp

combination. With any luck this will liberate enough cash to get yourself something like the Onkyo TX-NR929 or Yamaha RX-A1030 or Pioneer SC-LX57 – all of which are fully-loaded and offer pre-amp outputs. You could then use your MA240 for your main left and right speakers and the AVR's onboard power for all other channels. This scenario will give you all the features of a top-flight AVR plus the sumptuous stereo sound of

the Myryad amps when you are playing music. Better still, if you do like the sound of the new AVR with music, then you can sell the MA240 as a standalone stereo power amp.

Mark Craven replies: To follow Richard's answer, I wonder how many other people have the same problem as Pat? With a good power amp, there's always a desire not to get rid of it just because you need new

processing/switching tech, but standalone processors – from the likes of Primare, Bryston, Audiolab and even Marantz and Onkyo – are often expensive. Hence the temptation to look at an integrated AVR, and ending up with more amp channels than you need! I'd love an AVR brand to release a processor-only version of one of its cheaper integrated models (or even put multichannel pre-outs on the more affordable offerings) ■

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



WIN

The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

The second part of Peter Jackson's spectacular fantasy epic is available to buy on Blu-ray 3D, Blu-ray and DVD from April 7 – and thanks to Warner

Home Video we've got five copies of the Blu-ray 3D up for grabs...

Question:

Which of the following films was not directed by Peter Jackson?

Answer:

- A)** Braindead **B)** Return of the Living Dead
C) The Lovely Bones

Email your answer with **'Smaug'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



WIN

Homefront

Jason Statham is back in action busting heads and taking names in this explosive crime thriller, available to buy on DVD and Blu-ray now. To celebrate the release

Lionsgate UK has given us copies of the Blu-ray to give away to five lucky readers...

Question:

Which action superstar wrote the screenplay for Homefront?

Answer:

- A)** Jean-Claude Van Damme **B)** Steven Seagal
C) Sylvester Stallone

Email your answer with **'Homefront'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



WIN

Saving Mr. Banks

Emma Thompson and Tom Hanks star in this moving and witty account of the battle to bring *Mary Poppins* to the big screen. The film is available to

buy on Blu-ray™ and DVD now, and thanks to Walt Disney Home Entertainment we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away...

Question:

Who played the part of Mary Poppins in Disney's 1964 movie adaptation?

Answer:

- A)** Julie Garland **B)** Julie Newmar
C) Julie Andrews

Email your answer with **'Saving'** as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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WIN A Harman/Kardon Sabre SB35 soundbar



WORTH
£850

This premium soundbar/subwoofer duo offers an ultra-slim design, Bluetooth and HDMI connectivity and Harman/Kardon's sonic know-how

FED UP WITH the weak audio performance of your flatscreen TV? Then enter our competition to be in with a chance of winning Harman/Kardon's Sabre SB35 – a soundbar and subwoofer duo that promises to get the best from movie soundtracks.

Priced at £850, the SB35 mixes state-of-the-art technology with a super-slim, living room-friendly design. Installation is easy – a trio of HDMI inputs cater for your BD player, set-top box and games console (supported by onboard Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD decoders), while the ARC-compatible HDMI

output hooks directly into your TV. Other sources, such as smartphones and tablets, can connect wirelessly via Bluetooth. Optical and analogue audio inputs are also provided, and further improving ease of use is the SB35's front LCD display and IR remote and repeater.

The soundbar packs a bevy of custom-designed drivers – six 1.75in mid-range units and four 1in tweeters – into its 32mm deep

chassis, all powered by 140W of amplification and managed by the brand's advanced DSP. Sound presets, including Harman WAVE surround and a dedicated stereo music mode, ensure you can match performance to your sources and taste.

Providing additional low-end heft is the wireless, wall-mountable 100W subwoofer. Again, this can be tweaked for optimum performance, via crossover, phase and EQ settings, and its volume can be directly adjusted from the remote control.

We have one Sabre SB35 to give away, so what are you waiting for?

Question:

The lightsabre is a weapon from which science-fiction movie?

Answer:

- A)** Star Trek **B)** Star Wars
C) Alien

Email your answer, plus your name and full address, to: Competitions@homecinemachoice.com – with 'Harman' as the subject



The Sabre SB35 includes both a soundbar and wireless sub

For more information on the Sabre SB35 visit: www.harmankardon.co.uk

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Car? Park it outside!

HCC reader **John Johnston** has converted his garage into a sleek, stylish movie room



The room uses discreet in-wall and in-ceiling Monitor Audio speakers

John says the most frustrating part of the build was waiting for planning permission

Introduce yourself...

I'm John Johnston, aged 33, and I'm a professional photographer.

How long have you been into home cinema?

My friend Brian got me into it when I was around 18 years old. I remember he had a LaserDisc player and the picture quality it delivered was amazing at the time. And Dolby Pro-Logic was insane, too!

Then a few years later another friend had one of the first DVD players on the market and again, we couldn't believe the image quality. I guess this, amongst other things, got me hooked on home cinema.

When and why did you decide to build your dedicated room?

Me and my girlfriend moved into our home in August 2013 and I knew as soon as we viewed the house that I wanted to build a dedicated home cinema room. It had a garage that was the perfect place to do the build as it was never going to be used for cars.

How long did the project take?

It was done by a professional company, Avcomm.TV (www.avcomm.tv). I would say the job only took around six weeks maximum from start to finish (after getting planning permission from the local council). Going from other folk who have had this done, I would say that is very fast. I didn't do any of the work myself (apart from making lots of cups of tea) but I would say I put a lot of thought into the design and look of the room and it's been done exactly as I'd described.

Roughly how much have you spent on it?

I did originally have a budget of £12,000. This was including most, if not all, of the equipment but it did rise to around £16,000. I wanted it looking really cool so when it came down to buying all the stuff, I didn't want to start penny-pinching.

What was the most challenging part of the build? Is there anything you'd do differently if you were doing it again?

For me there wasn't really anything challenging as I had a team of skilled professionals working on the job, but looking back I would say the most frustrating part was waiting on the approval of the planning permission/building warrant at the beginning. I'm pretty impatient, though, and I really wanted it done by Christmas. The folk building it and installing the AV equipment pulled out all the stops to ensure I had it done by then. For that I can't thank them enough. I honestly cannot think of anything I would change or do differently.

So, what kit is in the system?

The projector is an Epson EH-TW8100, and it fires at a custom-made velvet fixed-frame screen using Cinesound Acoustic Transparent material. The sound system is a traditional 7.1 array (with rear speakers), incorporating three Monitor Audio WT280s for L/C/R,





John has since added additional seats at the rear of the room

four Monitor Audio CT380-FX speakers for the rear and surround channels, and a Monitor Audio Radius 380 subwoofer.

The speaker system is powered by a Yamaha RX-V675 AV receiver, with sources including a PlayStation 4 and my own custom-built home theatre/gaming PC.

All the AV equipment and lighting is controlled by a Harmony Ultimate remote control. The strip lighting on the ceiling and floor can be changed to any colour.

Those chairs look comfy. Where did you get them?

They are really comfy. I got them from a seller on eBay. They were actually not that expensive given the price of a lot of home cinema seats out there on the market. They have a massage controller so this makes them even more relaxing! I've also recently just added a small two-seater sofa behind them [not pictured], in case I have guests over.

A Yamaha AVR is the hub of the setup



Do you have your eye on any kit upgrades at the moment?

Not at the moment. The image quality off the Epson projector is stunning, both with 2D movies and 3D. It's like my own IMAX cinema!

What's your favourite bit of kit?

The PJ is certainly up there, as is the Yamaha AVR for its sound performance, but, strangely, I really like the Harmony Ultimate, given that it's taken away around seven remotes. I can even control my main lights and the strip lights going along the ceiling from this handset. And let's not forget to mention the little fridge I have tucked in between my AV equipment; it's thirsty work watching all these movies/sports events and playing video games...

What do friends and family think of the system?

They're blown away. That's all I can really say about that!

What are your favourite Blu-rays/games?

Too many to choose from but watching *Avatar* in 3D is simply stunning. *The Dark Knight* is up there, too – thunderous sound. Gaming-wise, *Call of Duty Ghosts* through my gaming PC is pretty special. *FIFA 14* on the PS4 is amazing, too.

What do you use to show off the system?

Avengers Assemble in 3D is a good one to show – particularly the scenes near the end.

What's your verdict on the finished room?

Absolutely priceless. Ever since I was a kid I've always wanted my own home cinema. What makes it extra special is my late brother – who sadly passed almost ten years ago – always wanted one but never got the chance. Hopefully he's looking down with a big smile on his face.

How often do you make use of it?

Every day actually. Given the job I have, I spend a lot of time working from home, so this gives me the best opportunities to watch stuff, providing I finish all my work, of course.

Lastly, are you excited by 4K/Ultra HD?

Truthfully, I haven't seen much of it. But if the step up from HD to Ultra HD is similar to the step from video to DVD or DVD to Blu-ray, then I'll be looking forward to it ■

For a video peek, visit: www.johnjohnstonphotography.co.uk/blog/2014/02/my-home-cinema-room

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself if you want) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic, and we'll be in touch.

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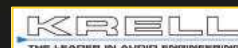
Since its inception, home theatre has presented tasks to high-end audio designers that challenge them in ways not seen before in a two-channel, analogue milieu. Digital surround sound processing directly confronted traditionalist music lovers, too, who felt that it compromised the purity of true high-end performance.

The wizards at Krell responded with a "clean sheet" approach, by delivering home theatre control centres to satisfy all purist criteria. The Foundation 7.1-Channel AV Processor is the latest in that long line, offering everything needed to master today's myriad viewing formats – from Blu-ray to 3D pass-through to TVs with built-in streaming – while maintaining Krell's exacting standards for analogue audio reproduction.



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FILM FRANCHISE

George A. Romero's ...*Dead* Series

We look back at the franchise that redefined what the word 'zombie' means to film fans

Diary of the Dead saw Romero take a 'found footage' approach to the undead apocalypse

Limited edition: In 2012 Twilight Time released Tom Savini's 1990 *Night of the Living Dead* remake on Blu-ray in the US. Limited to just 3,000 copies, the disc currently commands prices of over \$70



Ghouls with guns: Before the budget was slashed in half, Romero's original idea for *Day of the Dead* was a far grander affair, involving the military training and arming zombies to use as soldiers!

PRIOR TO THE late 1960s, the popular cinematic idea of a zombie was wedded to the traditional Haitian Vodou notion of a corpse revived from the dead by a sorcerer to do its bidding. That all changed in 1968 when former commercials director George A. Romero unleashed his debut feature film, *Night of the Living Dead*.

Inspired by the EC Comics of the '50s and their tales of vengeful ghouls returning from the grave, Romero's low-budget shocker re-imagined zombies as a plague of flesh-eating monsters, capable of swelling their ranks by infecting those they bite.

Most critics at the time were horrified by the gory violence – especially as the MPAA ratings system was not in place and young children could (and did) buy tickets, expecting more traditional, inoffensive, B-movie fodder. But, despite the controversy, the film was a massive hit around the world.

Not that this success made Romero and his colleagues rich. A bout of forgetfulness by the original distributor meant prints lacked a key copyright mark, and *Night of the Living Dead* soon fell into the public domain (years later, in 1990, the filmmakers tried, and failed, to rectify this with the production of a remake).

This unusual situation led to a rush of imitators and unofficial sequels – all of which saw this new type of zombie flourish on the silver screen, almost completely replacing the Vodou concept in the public consciousness. Yet Romero has remained, over the intervening decades, at the forefront of the zombie movement. Splatter fans have been thrilled by the following series of films (*Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, *Diary of the Dead* and *Survival of the Dead*) that mix ever more outlandish gore with surprisingly potent social commentary – the stars may be braindead, but the movies aren't.

'They're coming to get you Barbara!'



And you thought your acne was bad...



Whatever you do, don't give it the kiss of life



Gotta catch 'em all!

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 Dawn of the Dead

Having spent the first part of the '70s dabbling with suburban witches and biological weapons, Romero returned to the world of the undead in 1978. Bigger and better than its predecessor, *Dawn of the Dead* mixes gruesome gore (courtesy of makeup FX whiz Tom Savini) with a satirical slant to wicked effect. And Zack Snyder's 2004 remake isn't bad either.

2 Night of the Living Dead

Now more than 45 years old, Romero's black-and-white B-movie has lost none of its power to chill. Over the course of 95 minutes, this remarkable low-budget flick delivers a gruelling journey into the darkest areas of the horror genre. A true masterpiece.

3 Day of the Dead

Scaled back considerably from his initial idea, Romero's third zombie outing (from 1985) highlights the collapse of societal structure in the face of the undead invasion, while upping the ante considerably with Tom Savini's astonishing splatter effects.

AND THE WORST...

Night of the Living Dead: 30th Anniversary Edition

Those who argue that Romero's *Survival of the Dead* represents the nadir of the series haven't witnessed this abomination. With its dreadful newly-shot footage and terrible synth score, this re-edit (by original co-writer John Russo) is the equivalent of defacing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting *Dead*-head can afford to miss out on these...

"Bub" Deluxe Action Figure



Amok Time's impressive 7.5in sculpt of *Day of the Dead*'s most iconic zombie comes with a lab wall/floor diorama and numerous accessories, including a gun and tape recorder.

Book of the Dead



This 1989 anthology features 16 short stories set in George Romero's...*Dead* universe by the likes of Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell and Joe R. Lansdale. A second collection called *Still Dead* followed in 1992.

Zombi



So clearly 'inspired' by *Dawn of the Dead* that it's incredible Ubisoft wasn't sued, this scary icon-driven arcade adventure debuted on the Amstrad CPC in 1986, with Spectrum, C64, Amiga and Atari ST versions following in 1990.

Night of the Living Dead: 1:1 Scale Zombie Bust



Executive Replicas' life-size bust of the cemetery ghoul played by Bill Hinzman will add a touch of horror to any home cinema den and can be yours for around \$350.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

You'll need these if you want to complete your collection of ...*Dead* discs

Night of the Living Dead: Special Collector's Edition (R0 DVD)

Dawn of the Dead: Director's Cut (R2 DVD)

Day of the Dead (R2 DVD)

Night of the Living Dead: 30th Anniversary Edition (R2 DVD)

Night of the Living Dead: Millennium Edition (R1 DVD)

Dawn of the Dead: Director's Cut – Full Uncut Edition (R2 DVD)

Night of the Living Dead 3D (R1 DVD)



Dawn of the Dead: Ultimate Edition (R1 DVD)

George A Romero's Trilogy of the Dead (R2 DVD)

Dawn of the Dead (Region A BD)

Day of the Dead (Region A BD)

Diary of the Dead (Region B BD)

Land of the Dead: Director's

Cut (All-region BD)

Night of the Living Dead (Region B BD)

Night of the Living Dead (All-region BD)

Dawn of the Dead (All-region BD/R0 DVD)

Day of the Dead (All-region BD/R0 DVD)

Survival of the Dead (Region B BD)

Survival of the Dead: Ultimate Undead Edition (Region A BD)

Day of the Dead: Collector's Edition (Region A BD)



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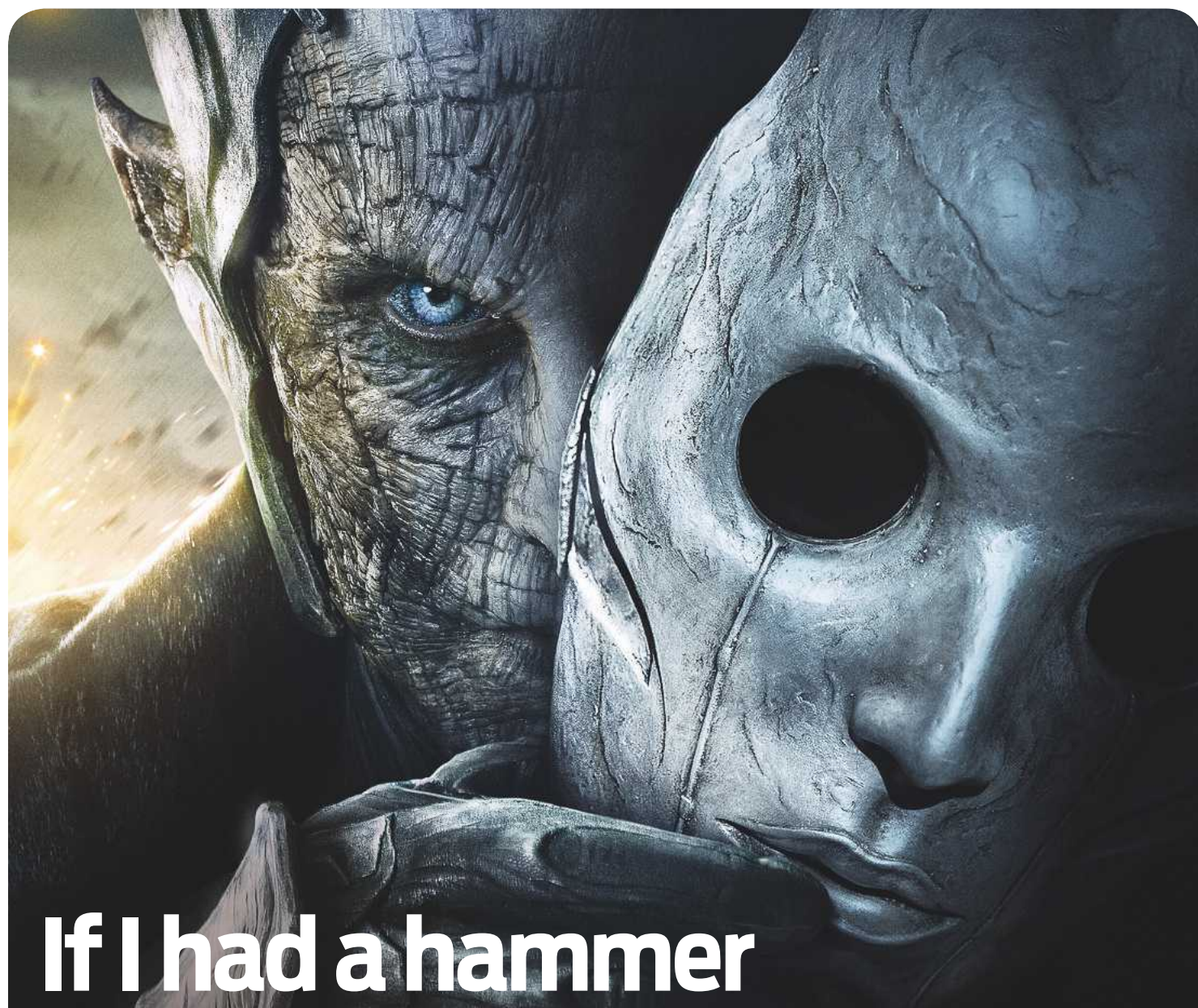
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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **GRAVITY** Award-winning sci-fi smash sets a new standard for 3D Blu-ray **THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG** Jackson's fantasy saga reaches the halfway point **FROZEN** Disney does Broadway with its latest CG cartoon **HOMEFRONT** Jason Statham is doing what he does best **WAKE IN FRIGHT** 'Lost' Aussie film resurrected on BD **AND MUCH MORE!**



If I had a hammer

Thor: The Dark World 3D → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → All-region BD

Can Marvel Studios continue its winning ways with this second solo outing for its hammer-wielding God of Thunder? Find out as we take a journey to the 'Dark World' on p101...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



Bilbo and Thorin soon learnt they weren't best suited to work as Avon Ladies



Here be dragons – at long last!

Jackson's epic adaptation continues to walk a long and winding road to the Lonely Mountain

→ THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG



This second instalment in Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy highlights the real flaws in the filmmaker's plan to spread the plot of what is a fairly slight book across three films.

Clocking it at 161 minutes...*The Desolation of Smaug* eschews traditional storytelling in favour of simply careening from one ridiculously bloated action set-piece to another. And, once again, it spares little-to-no time to fleshing out its characters along the way – even after having now spent over six hours in their company, we still couldn't tell you how many dwarves are in Bilbo's party and who most of them are.

It's only towards the end, when the crew finally confronts Smaug that things finally look to be getting back on track in terms of telling an actual story. But even then it quickly degenerates into yet another extended runaround, full of noise and fury but little substance.

Picture: Not only does the Blu-ray's AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p presentation dazzle with its rich colours and intricate detailing during brightly-lit scenes, but it also delivers with darker sequences.

Spin up Gandalf the Grey's exploration of the gloomy ruins of Dol Guldor in Chapter 29 and you'll be

bowled over by the crispness and intricacy of the imagery – and that's before you get to his duel with the Necromancer, which fills the screen with swirling shadows and is equally well resolved.

Audio: Jackson's action-packed fantasy sequel pairs its flawless image quality with a equally spectacular DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 soundtrack.

Use of the surrounds is continual and forceful, yet always exceptionally controlled (just listen to multitude of audio elements whipping around your speaker setup during Chapter 13's barrel ride). LFE presence is also very strong, with Smaug's booming voice resonating with genuinely tactile bass.

Extras: This two-disc set offers up a modest – but not uninteresting – selection of bonus features.

The sole extra on Disc One is *New Zealand: Home of Middle-earth, Part 2*, a seven-minute tour of some of the film's locations.

Disc Two kicks off with the best of the extras, the two-part *Peter Jackson Invites You to the Set*. Running just over 40 minutes, it gives viewers a taste of a typical day in the busy production of *The Hobbit* trilogy. This is supported by a quartet of online *Production Diaries*, three of which look at the pick-up shooting for the second and third films, while the fourth looks at the creation of the score.

Also included is a music video, an archival 38-minute Q&A with Jackson from March 2013, and trailers for the films and their videogame spin-offs.



HCC VERDICT

The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A superb AV package for a disappointing return to Middle-earth

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Turbo 3D

DreamWorks → Region B BD
£28 Approx



After a fairly strong run of animated flicks DreamWorks has hit the pits with this lacklustre tale of a snail who

dreams of winning the Indianapolis 500. Borrowing heavily from other, better, films, *Turbo* offers very little for anybody over the age of 10 to get excited about – unless you're talking about the film's Blu-ray presentation. The 1080p imagery (in both 3D and 2D incarnations) is absolutely stunning, while all of the racing action means that the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix is filled to the brim with convincing spatial effects. Unusually for a DreamWorks title there is no commentary among the BD's extras.



R.I.P.D. 3D

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Remember *Men in Black*? Well, imagine it with the undead instead of aliens and you'll have a pretty clear

idea of what to expect from this derivative comic book adaptation. Only it's much, much worse than you could ever imagine. Things don't get much better when it comes to the Blu-ray release itself. While the 'flat' AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode looks pretty spiffy, the 3D version is particularly unconvincing. The problem is the way that depth in the image appears to be split across layers, resulting in elements in the foreground looking disconnected from anything further back in the shot.



The Family

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This curiously off-kilter film from Luc Besson stars Robert De Niro as a former mafia boss who has dragged his

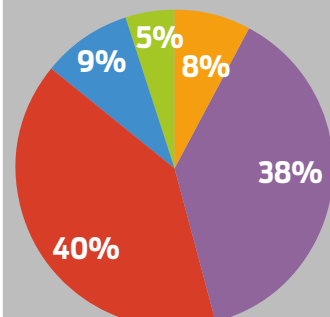
wife and kids to France as part of a witness protection scheme. Mixing corny fish-out-of-water comedy with violent mob drama, *The Family* is a decidedly odd film that veers wildly in tone and ends up leaving a slightly bitter taste in the mouth as the final credits roll. Not that this has stopped eOne from giving us a sumptuous AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix on this Blu-ray release. Although the extras – a short *Making of...* and compilation clip – are pretty lame.



WE ASKED...

On average, how many Blu-rays do you buy each month?

None One to two
Three to Five Six to 10
More than 10



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Sisters are doin' it for themselves

Don't make a song and dance about it, but Disney's latest 'toon is a smash on Blu-ray

→ FROZEN

Disney's 53rd animated movie sees the studio going 'full Broadway' with an all-singing, all-dancing take on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*.

Following in the footsteps of *Tangled* (a little too closely at times), *Frozen* delivers plenty of thrills and laughs, while eschewing the traditional 'love-conquers-all' message in favour of an empowering tale of the joys of sisterhood.

Picture: CG animation frequently delivers top-notch eye-candy and *Frozen* is no exception. With its crisp clean lines, sharp delineation, meticulous detailing and striking colour, the Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer is a flawless reproduction of the source material. And to crown its success, Disney's tech wizards have also banished any encoding-related issues, such as artefacting, banding or aliasing.

Audio: Not only do the film's musical numbers sound every bit as big, bold and expansive as you'd expect, but *Frozen*'s DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack also delivers a tangible, three-dimensional soundscape. So, whether it's the Oscar-winning song *Let it Go*, the booming bass accompanying the footsteps of a giant snowman or the creaking ice surrounding you inside the ice palace, this magical mix conjures up an enchanting acoustic experience.

Extras: Following the example set by *Tangled* and *Wreck-It Ralph*, this Blu-ray release of *Frozen* appears to confirm that Disney has all but given up creating meaningful behind-the-scenes material for its animated features.

The only extra of any real depth is the seven-minute featurette *D'frosted: Disney's Journey from*



Hans Christian Andersen to Frozen. Here, the filmmakers discuss Walt Disney's attempts to make a film based on *The Snow Queen*, before joining legendary costume designer Alice Estes Davis to look over a series of illustrations by her late husband (Disney animator and 'Imagineer' Marc Davis) for a Snow Queen theme park ride that was never made.

Also included are a quartet of deleted scenes (with optional intros by the filmmakers), four music videos (the same song – *Let it Go* – by three different singers in four different languages), the original teaser trailer and the new Mickey Mouse theatrical short *Get a Horse!*

But just to rub salt into the wound regarding the lack of a commentary or behind-the-scenes documentary, this meagre selection of extras is capped with a jokey three minute musical segment called *'Making of'*, which repeatedly asks how the film was made, only to answer that nobody knows...



HCC VERDICT

Frozen

→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Another animated gem that boasts stunning AV on BD. But is it too much to ask for some quality extras?

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

DISC
OF THE
MONTH

The final countdown?

Think that 3D Blu-ray has had its day? This stellar hi-def platter will be enough to convince you otherwise...



→ GRAVITY 3D

When their space shuttle is destroyed by a massive cloud of orbital debris, astronauts Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and Matt Kowalsky (George Clooney) find themselves in a race against time to find another way back down to Earth.

With *Gravity*, director Alfonso Cuarón has crafted a spectacular cinematic blockbuster that is both a pulse-pounding hi-tech thriller and a metaphor for the human condition. This curious dichotomy also extends to *Gravity*'s creation, with Cuarón and his colleagues having to employ the very latest, cutting-edge filmmaking techniques



DEMO SCREEN...

Gravity 3D

Time code: 009.51 – 013.08



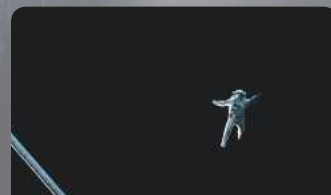
Debris cloud: A routine spacewalk to service the Hubble Telescope is interrupted by the news that they are in the path of a cloud of debris caused by the destruction of a defunct Russian satellite.



Spinning around: Steven Price's electrifying score rises in intensity as the wreckage flies into shot from the depths of the 3D image, before impacting with the shuttle and making it spin uncontrollably.



Depth perception: Your system's ability to cope with seamless 3D motion in and out of the screen is really put to the test as Dr. Stone remains tethered to the rapidly spinning shuttle by a robotic arm.



Lost in space: As she breaks free from her harness, Dr Stone is thrown off into the blackness of space – the Blu-ray's 3D encode helping to isolate her diminishing form in the frame.

and technologies at every stage of the production process to bring this surprisingly intimate and humanistic tale to life.

The result is both a technological marvel and an utterly enthralling piece of popcorn cinema. One that draws you into its orbit with its spectacular digital effects and edge-of-the-seat thrills, but keeps you hooked through its intimate characterisation.

Picture: More so than even *Avatar*, *Gravity* is a film that simply demands to be seen in 3D – and Warner Home Video's stereoscopic MVC 2.40:1 1080p encode delivers in spades.

Whether the transfer is dealing with largescale effects (such as the breathtaking 13-minute tracking shot that opens the film) or smaller moments (the curved light refracting off the glass as the camera moves inside Stone's helmet in Chapter 2) image depth and dimensionality are both absolutely first-rate. Fine detailing is also brilliantly resolved and adds a wholly convincing sense of three-dimensional texture to every surface.

Excellent colour saturation, contrast and black levels round out a transfer that undoubtedly sits at the very pinnacle of what 3D Blu-ray is capable of.

Warner's 3D Blu-ray release also includes a second hi-def platter containing a 'flat' AVC 2.40:1 1080p presentation. As you might expect, this too is absolutely gorgeous – although any minor improvements in clarity or sharpness over the 3D version are countered by that version's masterful use of depth and space, which add greatly to the overall viewing experience. So if you have a 3D setup, stick to the stereoscopic iteration.

Audio: *Gravity*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix goes to show that intelligent sound design can be much more effective at immersing a filmgoer in the onscreen action than simply bludgeoning them over and over again with overblown dynamics. It's also a tantalising example of how movies mixed in Dolby Atmos can translate to a domestic setup.

Even though the film ignores explosive Foley effects (there's no sound in a vacuum after all), that's not to say that the mix feels lacking in any way.



Alfonso Cuarón directs Bullock and Clooney on one of *Gravity*'s handful of practical sets



Sandra was regretting trying to fly her kite in space

As the camera swoops around the actors in lengthy takes, the dialogue seamlessly pans around the speakers. This even extends to how clear the dialogue is, diminishing with distance from the camera to help give the sense of a 3D space.

Meanwhile, Steven Price's eclectic and dramatic score fills the gaps, swelling up to drive home the drama as the debris cloud approaches the space shuttle, before careening around the speakers to match Dr. Stone as she spins out of control on the shuttle's arm.

Brave, brilliant and breathtaking, *Gravity*'s sound design is a reference-quality experience that you'll return to again and again.

Extras: Those of you with any interest at all in how *Gravity* was made will get a real kick out of the extras assembled for this Blu-ray release.

Gravity: Mission Control is one of the most in-depth behind-the-scenes documentaries we've seen in quite a while. Made up of nine featurettes, running 107 minutes in total, it looks at the origins of the project; the unusual (but pivotal) role pre-viz played in the filmmaking process; the new technologies that had to be developed to shoot the live-action material; the challenges of recreating weightlessness in live-action and digital realms; the cast; the score; and much, much more.

Supporting this are five *Shot Breakdowns*, running just under 37 minutes. More than simple visual effects breakdowns, each of these scene-specific featurettes takes an in-depth look at the creation of one of the film's key sequences.

The 22-minute *Collision Point: The Race to Clean Up Space* is narrated by Ed Harris and explores the looming crisis caused by the growing amount of space debris orbiting our planet. The picture it paints for the future of space exploration is troubling indeed, especially as solutions seem few and far between.

The final extra is *Gravity* co-writer Jonás Cuarón's 10-minute short film *Aningaaq*, which shows Dr. Stone's radio conversation with the Inuit fisherman from his point of view.

Curiously, the 'Silent Space' version of *Gravity* touted on the UK press release for this Blu-ray release is absent on the finished disc. Although as this feature wasn't included on the earlier US disc, its omission didn't come as much of a surprise.



Gravity succeeds in telling a surprisingly intimate story on a truly epic scale



HCC VERDICT

Gravity 3D

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: An astonishing technical achievement – both for filmmaking in general and 3D home entertainment

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

Square Enix → Xbox 360/PS3 → £50 Approx



Few game developers are capable of delivering such lavish cinematics for their titles as Square Enix. Boasting production values that appear to dwarf those of some animated movies, the biggest beneficiary of this has been the *Final Fantasy* series of RPGs.

And *Lightning Returns*... is no different.

Set 500 years after the events of *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, this third and final part of the trilogy gives players control of the titular Lightning, who now finds herself kitted out with some new powers and on a mission from God. Unfortunately there are only 13 days left before the world will end, meaning she's going to have to get busy saving souls if she wants to keep Him happy and have her sister returned to her.

All of that sounds pretty exciting. Indeed, the flawless animation and beautifully orchestrated audio of the opening cinematic sequence will be enough to captivate even those who have little time for the genre. But once past this and into the game itself, *Lightning Returns*... is a pretty average addition to the genre. While the costume-based combat has been livened up slightly, it's still hampered by a camera that frequently fails to keep up with the action. And the race-against-time structure ultimately boils down to nothing more than a *Dead Rising*-style daily checklist for you to work through.



Zoo Tycoon

Frontier Games/Microsoft → Xbox One/Xbox 360 → £50 Approx



So here's what *Zoo Tycoon* teaches you (and, more likely, your kids). First, it's apparently acceptable to have a zoo without penguins. Second, zoos can only grow to a surprisingly limited size before you have to get rid of, say, a hippo to make way for a lizard. Finally, *Zoo Tycoon* makes it clear that there are far more varieties of antelope,



bear, lion, giraffe, tiger, elephant, rhino, monkey and bird (except penguins) than you ever imagined. Which rather handily means *Zoo Tycoon*'s makers essentially only have to do a 'respray' job over the same core animal animations and graphics to radically

boost the claimed critter count. Hmm...

This use of smoke and (admittedly engagingly pretty) mirrors to hide a fundamental lack of gameworld scope sadly defines the whole *Zoo Tycoon* experience after your first charming few hours. We've seen first-hand that even young children feel cheated when they're suddenly informed that their beloved zoo creation can't expand any more for no other reason than the game engine can't handle it. So what initially looks like a fun Xbox One technical showcase and a great family alternative to the usual first-person shooter aggression ends up leaving a sour taste in the mouth that even potential future DLC penguins won't shift.



The Stuff

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£25 Approx



Part *The Blob*, part *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Larry Cohen's horror-comedy deals with a delicious dessert with a mind of its own. Having owned *The Stuff* on numerous formats

over the years, we had no idea it could ever look as good as it does here – but that's what you get when a skilled restoration team works its magic using a 2K scan of the original camera negatives. Audio is presented as LPCM mono and extras include a new 52-minute look back at the making of the movie.



The Professionals: Mk I

Network → All-region BD
£40 Approx



Following its success with *The Prisoner* and *The Sweeney*, Network has now turned its attention to this action-packed late '70s/early '80s crime series. Access to the original camera

negatives has reaped huge rewards in terms of image fidelity for the set's remastered 1080i50 encodes, and new DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes are included alongside the original mono tracks (albeit only in lossy Dolby Digital 2.0 form). DTS-HD MA 2.0 music-only tracks for every episode, a 1996 Channel 4 documentary and extensive photo galleries are among the extras.



Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This excellent time travel comedy (clearly a major inspiration for *Doctor Who* showrunner Steven Moffat) jumps onto Blu-ray with a righteous hi-def package. While

a little rough around the edges, the AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode looks true to the source material, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 and LPCM 2.0 both rock pretty hard given their inherent limitations. Best of the limited extras are a 20-minute chat with the film's creators and an episode of the cartoon spin-off. Party on, dudes!



Thor finally felt ready to tackle his flatpacked IKEA wardrobe



Saving the universe should be fun

Marvel's superhero sequel proves that not every comic book star needs to overdose on angst

→ THOR: THE DARK WORLD

When Jane Foster (Natalie Portman) is infected by an ancient weapon known as the Aether and awakens the Dark Elf Malekith (Christopher Eccleston), the fate of all Nine Realms hangs in the balance. The only person who can help Thor (Chris Hemsworth) save the universe is his brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston) – but could he be an even bigger threat to Asgard than Malekith's army?

Bigger and better than Thor's first solo film, this superior sequel significantly ramps up both the spectacle and humour (it's easily the funniest Marvel Studios film to date) while building on the character work laid out previously. In other words, it's great fun and shows a studio at the top of its game.

Picture: As with almost all of Marvel's 3D conversions to date, *Thor: The Dark World* isn't likely to wow you with its stereoscopic spectacle. Brightly-lit scenes (mainly those in Asgard) hold up reasonably well, but much of the film is so dark that it just ends up looking rather flat and making the imagery that much duller.

Much better is the film's essentially flawless 2D AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. Packed full of intricate details and excellent delineation, it immerses you in director Alan Taylor's dark imagery in a way that the 3D version can't compete with.

Audio: Like its predecessor, *Thor: The Dark World* sports a thunderous DTS-HD MA 7.1



mix, packed with explosions, laser fire, screams... pretty much everything, basically.

In other words, it's a ridiculously forceful and dynamic affair that will fill your cinema room with expertly positioned directional effects and dollops of subwoofer-bothering bass. Which is just what we want from

an action-packed blockbuster.

Extras: There's a nice selection of extras here, the best being an informative chat-track, where director Alan Taylor and cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau explore the production in detail, while producer/Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige and actor Tom Hiddleston liven things up with anecdotes.

The 32-minute *A Brother's Journey: Thor & Loki* looks at the casting of Hemsworth and Hiddleston (including footage of the latter auditioning for the role of Thor). It also traces the character arcs for the two Asgardian brothers and provides a bit more insight into the making of the sequel.

This is joined by a five-minute featurette about composer Brian Taylor's work on the movie.

All Hail the King is the latest – and funniest – Marvel One-Shot short film, which answers a few questions (and poses a few more) about Ben Kingsley's Mandarin from *Iron Man 3*.

Rounding things out are six deleted scenes with optional commentary, a gag reel and a preview for *Captain America 2*.

Who's harder – Marvel's Dark Elves or Tolkien's Wood-Elves? There's only one way to find out...



Everyone soon looks this battered and bruised come rush hour on the Tube



HCC VERDICT

Thor: The Dark World 3D
→ Walt Disney Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £28 Approx
WE SAY: The 3D conversion may be pointless, but otherwise this superhero sequel is a divine experience on Blu-ray

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Statham needed to get a more discreet cigarette lighter



Breaking Bad on the Bayou

Statham tackles crystal meth dealers in this Sylvester Stallone-penned Deep South thriller

→ HOMEFRONT

Parker. Safe. Hummingbird. Homefront. Outside of his regular role in *The Expendables* franchise, Jason Statham is knocking out medium-budget thrillers at quite a pace, and the danger is that they all blur into one. That would be a shame, as this latest flick is a competent, tightly-scripted and well-paced effort with some great set pieces and a plot that doesn't (quite) follow the usual path.

Statham plays Phil Broker, an ex-undercover agent now trying to live a tranquil existence in the Louisiana Bayou with his young daughter. Trouble arises when his feisty offspring picks a fight with the school bully, whose mother is an angry meth-head (Kate Bosworth) and sister to Gator Bodine, the drug-cookin' local kingpin (James Franco). Bodine soon learns of Broker's law enforcement past, and thinks he can earn brownie points by informing the leader of the biker gang that Broker helped put in jail. Soon our balding hero is fighting off a procession of Southern thugs, while Bodine wonders if he's bitten off more than he can chew.

Statham is completely comfortable here as the don't-make-him-angry hardman, and Franco hypnotic as the creepy villain. These lead performances are helped by some surprisingly high production

values and Sylvester Stallone's steady hand on the tiller – he serves as producer here, having originally written the script for himself. Perfectly acceptable popcorn fodder.

Picture: This 2.40:1 AVC Full HD encode is, at times, gorgeous. Exterior shots, such as the scenes of Broker and daughter enjoying a sun-lit horse ride, are bright and sharp, while close-ups reveal high levels of pixel detail. Contrast is ramped up for style, but not to the point of ugliness. However, director Gary Fleder chooses to shroud some shots in a weird blue tint, which is irksome – more importantly, some dark sequences, like those when Bodine snoops around Broker's cellar, struggle to hold up, resulting in a lack of detail and visible noise.

Audio: The use of the LFE channel is probably the best thing about *Homefront*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix – it's called upon regularly to make sure Statham's fists carry weight and explosions and gunfire aren't damp squibs. Dialogue is delivered cleanly, and the surround channels have a part to play in creating the ambience of the film's locations, whether it's a busy clam bar or the quiet riverside meadows. Like the movie itself, this is tight, efficient sound editing.

Extras: Only three extras on Lionsgate's Blu-ray, and none are worth more than a cursory glance – the two short featurettes mix talking heads footage (some repeated) with sequences from the movie you've just watched, while the deleted scenes are brief and don't add much.



HCC VERDICT

Homefront

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £23 Approx

WE SAY: An enjoyable thriller on a decent disc – but we'd love a Statham commentary track one of these days

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Machine

Anchor Bay → Region B BD
£23 Approx



In many ways this sci-fi flick about the creation of the world's first self-aware artificial intelligence, and the military's attempt to subvert it, feels like a thematic precursor to *Blade Runner*. However, writer-director Caradog James's low-budget British film has a distinctive style of its own – something that clearly comes across in this Blu-ray's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is rather more modest, but it's effectively employed throughout. It's just a pity, then, that the disc is devoid of extras, as a film like this is just crying out for some behind-the-scenes material.



Seven Samurai

BFI → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Akira Kurosawa's 1954 epic is long overdue a quality Blu-ray release in the UK. Sadly, this BFI release does little to change matters. Restored by Toho in Japan (with additional work done in the UK to remove further damage), it appears that somewhere along the way someone went a little overboard with the digital noise reduction tools – eliminating much of the native film grain and fine detail. Couple that with the relative lack of extras (a trailer and interview) and connoisseurs are far better off importing Criterion's Region A-locked US set with its more authentic transfer and copious goodies.



The 10th Victim

Shameless Entertainment
All-region BD/RO DVD → £18 Approx



Taking its cues from *The Most Dangerous Game*, this groovy Italian sci-fi satire stars Ursula Andress and Marcello Mastroianni as participants in 'The Big Hunt' – the world's most popular (and deadly) form of entertainment. Director Elio Petri's cult classic arrives on Blu-ray in the UK with a fantastic 1.85:1 Full HD encode that brings the very best out of its Pop Art visuals. Likewise, the two LPCM 2.0 soundtracks (English and Italian) do wonders for the achingly hip score. Also included on the disc are a half-hour chat with Petri's wife Paola and film critic Kim Newman, a trailer and a poster gallery.



Hatchet III

Metrodome → R2 DVD
£13 Approx



Franchise creator Adam Green may no longer be calling the shots behind the camera, but as far as the onscreen action goes it's business as usual for this '80s throwback slasher sequel. Whether that's a good thing or not will depend on your tolerance for violence and gore – suffice to say, if you're a fan of the others then it's bound to please. This is more than can be said for Metrodome's UK release. While the film got a Blu-ray release in the US featuring DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio and two commentaries, here in the UK we're stuck with a slightly muddy looking DVD with no extras and only Dolby Digital 2.0 audio.



Lost and found in the land of Oz

'Missing' Australian classic is reborn on Blu-ray as one of the Masters of Cinema

→ WAKE IN FRIGHT

Once believed lost forever, this nightmarish account of one man's alcohol-fuelled misadventures while trapped penniless in a remote outback town has finally resurfaced, and can be seen for the influential masterpiece it really is. Having lost none of its power to shock audiences over the decades (particularly with its notorious kangaroo hunt sequence), *Wake in Fright* is a chilling look into the dark heart of outback living that proves every bit as unsettling today as it no doubt did 43 years ago.

Picture: While it will never be regarded as one of the best-looking transfers in the Masters of Cinema lineup, *Wake in Fright*'s AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode does the best it can with the materials available.

Digitally restored by Atlab/Deluxe in Australia (after photochemical tests delivered unsatisfactory results), the print is in extremely good shape with very little damage on show. Colour reproduction is also very good, particularly when it comes to depicting the bright reds, oranges and yellows that dominate the daytime palette.

Black levels are also pretty fine on the whole, with scenes such as the night-time kangaroo hunt looking suitably inky and nightmarish. However, there are a few occasions where they don't hold up quite so well. During the early scenes inside Tim Hynes' house in Chapter 4 there's a notable absence of shadow detail coupled with a slight green tint to the black levels that effectively wipes out areas of the image.

Audio: As with the disc's hi-def encode, the accompanying LPCM 2.0 mix is about as good as you could really hope for. Dynamics are a touch limited



HCC VERDICT

Wake in Fright

→ Eureka! Masters of Cinema
→ Region B BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: Ted Kotcheff's shocking yet influential Australian classic gets the Blu-ray platter it deserved

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



The lads spot another Brit singing *Waltzing Matilda*

throughout, but this doesn't negatively impact on the presentation of the film's deliberately disorientating sound design, or the range of thick Australian accents on display.

Extras: There are plenty of intriguing extras here, including a commentary by director Ted Kotcheff and editor Anthony Buckley, plus a 23-minute interview with Kotcheff recorded in 2009.

Yet more behind-the-scenes and contextual info can be gleaned from the disc's selection of archival TV material. There's an extract from a documentary exploring the film's credentials as an 'Australian' film, an obituary for actor Chips Rafferty and a news piece about the film's rediscovery and re-release.

Finally there's a US TV spot (where it was titled *Outback*), the trailer and another of the Masters of Cinema range's exhaustively researched booklets, packed with writing about the movie, including a detailed account of its rediscovery. Bonza.



You can stand under my umbrella...

Forget Rhianna, we'd much rather take shelter from the rain with Catherine Deneuve

→ THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG

Free from overt sentiment and weighted down by a brooding sense of loss, Jacques Demy's masterpiece feels as much informed by the kitchen sink dramas Britain was producing in the '50s and '60s as it is by Hollywood's lavish musical extravaganzas. The difference here is that this tale of love and loss is told entirely through the medium of song.

Nino Castelnuovo and Catherine Deneuve star as Guy and Genèvieve, the film's two young lovers who are torn apart when he is drafted and must leave to fight in the Algerian War. With Guy only writing occasionally (a sure sign he has forgotten her, according to her mother) things only go from bad to worse when Genèvieve learns she is pregnant...

Picture: StudioCanal's Blu-ray uses a new 2K restoration of the film undertaken in 2013, with colour grading supervised by director Jacques Demy's son Mathieu (an accomplished filmmaker himself). Not only does the resulting AVC-encoded 1.85:1 1080p image look authentically film-like, with no traces of heavy-handed digital manipulation, but shadow delineation and colour saturation are both significantly improved over all previous releases.

Audio: Drawing on the original 1963 mono mix, a 1992 Dolby SR optical negative and digital multitrack tapes from the same year, this Blu-ray gives viewers the choice of restored LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. Naturally, the multichannel mix feels



Beautiful blue skies and not an umbrella in sight



rather more enveloping in its deployment of the film's music, but at the end of the day there's very little to choose between them when it comes to the all-important clarity and tonality of the singing.

Extras: As well as the film, the Blu-ray also contains an 87-minute documentary about Jacques Demy; a 52-minute documentary about *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*; a six-minute look at the restoration process; a 66-minute audio interview with Catherine Deneuve; interviews with the BFI's Geoff Andrew and actress Virginnie Ledoyen about the film's impact and legacy; a stills gallery; and a pair of trailers (one from the original release in 1964, the other for the UK re-release in 2013).

HCC VERDICT

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg: 50th Anniversary Edition

→ StudioCanal

→ Region B BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: A spectacular hi-def platter for a wonderful film. C'est magnifique!

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Saving Mr. Banks

Walt Disney Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £20 Approx



Emma Thompson is on great form as P.L. Travers in this sanitised, but no less enjoyable, account of Walt Disney's battle to bring Mary Poppins to the big screen. Supported by a fantastic

cast (including Tom Hanks, Colin Farrell, Bradley Whitford and Paul Giamatti) Thompson brings a genuinely sense of fragility to the prickly author that anchors what could otherwise have been a sugar-coated, sentimental tale. Disney's Blu-ray package is rather lacking in extras, but makes up for this somewhat with its impeccable AVC 2.35:1 1080p visuals and perfectly realised DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics.



Blue Jasmine

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Cate Blanchett deserves every award that has been thrust her way for her performance here as a troubled New York

socialite seeking solace from a failed marriage at her sister's house in Woody Allen's tribute to *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Unfortunately, the story it tells doesn't quite justify such a fantastic performance – ultimately asking us to laugh at, rather than sympathise with, Jasmine's plight. That said, it's still one of Allen's better films of late, and this BD's nuanced AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix make the act of watching it all the more pleasurable.



Philomena

Pathe! → Region B BD
£25 Approx



While offering none of the AV bombast of, say, *Gravity 3D*, *Philomena* is worth investigating – screenwriter/star

Steve Coogan and director Stephen Frears rustle up a well-meaning, humour-tinged drama around the real-life story of Philomena Lee, a woman hoping to track down her son fifty years after being forced to give him up for adoption. The DTS-HD 5.1 mix is rather restrained, but the disc delivers the sedate 1.85:1 Full HD visuals without fuss, and there are plenty of extras here, including a commentary track from Coogan and co-writer Jeff Pope buried in the Audio options menu.



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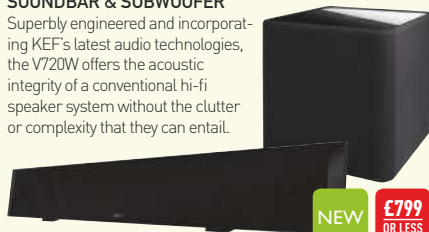
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HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Samsung UE55F9000** → £3,300

★★★★★

After debuting with a £35,000 85in beast, Samsung enters the sensible Ultra HD TV arena with an absolute star. This neat-looking 55incher offers superb upscaling of regular HD sources and immersive active 3D. *HCC #226*

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400 ★★★★★

Flaunting the brand's new Triluminos edge LED lighting, this set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. Pricey, but worth it. *HCC #222*

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K... *HCC #223*

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. *HCC #221*

**Samsung UE46F8000** → £1,800 ★★★★★

The F8000 tops Samsung's LED lineup (if you exclude the £35,000 S9 Ultra HD set) and is a consistently good performer. Bright, vivid images married to a super-stylish design. *HCC #221*

**Sony KDL-65X9005A** → £5,000 ★★★★★

The first 'affordable' Ultra HD screen we've tested, Sony's 65in next-gen panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. *HCC #230*

**Panasonic TX-L65WT600** → £5,400 ★★★★★

With its HDMI 2.0 and DisplayPort hookup, this is the 4K option for those who want a degree of futureproofing. Other 65in rivals are available for less, however. *HCC #230*

**Panasonic TX-P42GT60** → £1,150 ★★★★★

This mid-range plasma still carries much of the technology found on Panasonic's higher-end PDPs, and delivers finessed, film-friendly Full HD visuals. Not very stylish, though. *HCC #226*

**Toshiba 84L9363DB** → £7,000 ★★★★★

An 84in 4K screen for only £7,000 – this Tosh is certainly a bargain. Native 4K impresses in terms of clarity and colour punch, but motion and upscaling can be bettered. *HCC #231*

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for £500 is hard to ignore, and this LG rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart tech here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling. *HCC #219*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 90ins are also hitting the high street – and 85in 4K panels are also on offer. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and more energy consumption. There's also a limited choice – only Samsung, LG and Panasonic are selling plasma TVs in the UK, and the latter will soon stop.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Fast & Furious 6: Extended Action Packed Edition**

This is pure escapism on a cracking BD disc – the car acrobatics and rapid-fire fist-fights are delivered with pin-sharp 2.40:1 visuals and a precision-steered soundmix.

★★★★★

**Pacific Rim 3D**

While the lack of a 7.1 mix is disappointing, Guillermo del Toro's monster mash still delivers demo-worthy hi-def visuals in both its 2D and 3D incarnations. It also comes loaded with fantastic extras.

★★★★★

**Man of Steel 3D**

Looking for a lossless soundtrack that is guaranteed to push your audio setup to its absolute limits? Then do yourself (and your home cinema) a favour and pick up Superman's latest cinematic outing.

★★★★★

**Rush**

This Formula One biopic is simply magnificent, both in terms of production values/performance and its thrilling DTS-HD 5.1 mix. The BD hosts a nice selection of extras, too – an essential disc for petrolheads.

★★★★★

**Iron Man 3**

This third outing for Robert Downey Jr's superhero re-ignites the franchise, with director Shane Black injecting wry humour into the mayhem. Walt Disney's Blu-ray doesn't disappoint in AV terms either.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. A new model, the £600 BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. *HCC #215/#228*
- 2**  **Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★**
 This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. *HCC #210*
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. *HCC #217*
- 4**  **Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. *HCC #220*
- 5**  **Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★**
 An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. *HCC #219*
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**
 As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. *HCC #217*
- 7**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★**
 Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though. *HCC #208*
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★**
 Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. *HCC #222*
- 9**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★**
 New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. *HCC #221*
- 10**  **Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★**
 The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart hub is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. *HCC #227*

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joy pad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The recent PS4 currently doesn't offer 3D BD (or CD) playback.



DEMO DELIGHT

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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Blu-ray

At the top of everyone's shortlist



TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-VW500ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

Sony's second-gen 4K projector is around half the price of the VPL-VW1000ES (below) and comes with HDMI 2.0 chipper and Triluminos colour wizardry. Auditioning this classy PJ is a no-brainer. *HCC #228*

**JVC X500R** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more adept third-generation of the brand's proprietary e-shift technology, the X500R continues JVC's winning ways – contrast rich, sharp and full of tweaks. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! *HCC #209*

**SIM2 Super Lumis** → £37,000 ★★★★★

With a more potent lamp than its Lumis forebear, this light-cannon from SIM2 costs an arm and leg, and is only Full HD, but delivers an astonishing level of performance. *HCC #227*

**Epson EH-TW7200** → £1,900 ★★★★★

Priced to appeal to those unable to dabble in the £3,000 market, Epson's mid-ranger is a great purchase. No frame interpolation on offer, but colours, contrast and brightness impress. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-HW55ES** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Not one of Sony's 4K models, but this keenly priced Full HD projector delivers where it counts, with solid calibration options, simple setup and brilliant 2D visuals. No 12V trigger. *HCC #230*

**Epson EH-TW9200W** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A brilliant mid-range projector with wireless HD transmission and ISF certification, yet the noise generated when running in 'Normal' lamp mode could be a concern for some. *HCC #231*

**Panasonic PT-AT6000E** → £2,900 ★★★★★

Panasonic's PJ is a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't get any 3D spex bundled in the box... *HCC #215*

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. *HCC #220*

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. *HCC #220*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500



A 7.1 array mixing both dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. *HCC #212*



Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. *HCC #211*



Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. *HCC #224*



Kreisel Sound Quattro 7.2 → £8,500 ★★★★★

Mixing two mammoth woofers with some surprisingly manageable multi-tweeter speakers (including TriFX surrounds) this US package is supremely assured. *HCC #232*



M&K Sound S150 MkII → £7,150 ★★★★★

A no-nonsense 5.1 package with Hollywood heritage and THX Ultra2 certification, this is all about uncoloured, deeply detailed audio rather than flashy aesthetics. *HCC #225*



DALI Epicon 5.1 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic. *HCC #222*



Tannoy Precision Series 5.1 → £4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. *HCC #226*



Monitor Audio Radius R90HTI → £1,500 ★★★★★

The long-loved Radius speakers have been revamped with new drivers and rear ports, and this 5.1 set provides a clear, detailed sound with plenty of heft. Looks good in white, too. *HCC #230*



KEF E305 5.1 → £900 ★★★★★

The living room-friendly looks of KEF's newest set of 'eggs' will ensure they get a lot of fans, and sound quality, courtesy of the brand's Uni-Q driver array, is superb. *HCC #222*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Man of Steel: Zack Snyder's reboot is a great BD for proving a speaker package's mettle. Head to the Smallville battle and be dazzled by a 7.1 mix with huge dynamics, incredible bass and remarkable surround steering – the latter most evident when General Zod removes his helmet and is overpowered by swirling, dizzying sounds.

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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony STR-DA5800ES** → £2,200

★★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, a unique video-on-demand platform), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. *HCC #223*

**Anthem MRX-510** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The Canadian brand returns in style with an AVR that ignores streaming/networking features but boasts supreme room EQ and eats movie soundtracks for breakfast. *HCC #232*

**Denon AVR-4520** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Denon's flagship AVR sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. *HCC #218*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Krell Foundation** → £6,500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*

**Yamaha CX-A5000** → £2,500 ★★★★★

Part of Yamaha's new high-end separates line (you can match it with the MX-A5000 amp), this 11-channel processor sounds clean, precise and offers a dizzying range of features. *HCC #228*

**Marantz AV8801** → £2,500 ★★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. *HCC #220*

**Onkyo TX-NR929** → £1,000 ★★★★★

You get a lot for your cash with this 9.2-channel model – built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi join THX Select2 certification and excellent connectivity. Creates a large, full-bodied soundstage. *HCC #231*

**Pioneer SC-LX87** → £2,000 ★★★★★

A multi-talented 9.2-channel AVR that excels in terms of clarity and scale. Wi-Fi is via a supplied adaptor, and the UI is beginning to look dated compared to the competition. *HCC #230*

**Yamaha RX-V675** → £500 ★★★★★

The new low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. *HCC #225*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx
& may have changed

- 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. HCC #197
- 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208
- 

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast. HCC #201
- 

REL Acoustics T-7 → £650 ★★★★★
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PVI uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 

REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth. HCC #208
- 

REL Habitat 1 → £1,300 ★★★★★
With its LongBow wireless system and wall-mountable design, REL's newest woofer is aimed at those seeking discreet bass. Twin 6.5in drivers work fast and with considerable grip. HCC #231
- 

SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223
- 

Quadral Qube 10 → £525 ★★★★★★
A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Oblivion: Joseph Kosinski's sophomore sci-fi flick looks spectacular on Blu-ray, and its visual panache is matched by a 7.1 audio mix that particularly impresses with its low-end extension. The subwoofer channel here is regularly employed, dropping deep and loud to accompany everything from explosions and weapons fire to the roaring engines of Tom Cruise's recon ship. Love your lows? Then love this.

Top 5 HD GAMES

**Dead Rising 3**

Killing hundreds of zombies with an outrageous range of weapons is the order of the day in this delightfully demented sequel. Certainly not the best-looking Xbox One title, but probably the most fun

★★★★★

**Forza Motorsport 5**

This game's headline trick is delivering its huge car collection and decent selection of tracks in wonderfully detailed 1080p at a silky smooth 60fps. That it's not quite perfect – dodgy AI, for a start – is less important.

★★★★★

**Grand Theft Auto V**

Rockstar's newest slice of car-jacking, gun-wielding fun is absolutely massive in both scale and ambition – a big-budget game that will leave a big grin on your face. Graphically gorgeous, and the 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.

★★★★★

**Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag**

This sequel takes to the high seas for piratical fun, with an enormous open world, absorbing gameplay, beautiful graphics and a soundtrack packed with well-realised ambient effects.

★★★★★










**Tomb Raider**

Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.

★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Simple Audio Listen → £400 ★★★★★**

 Stereo Bluetooth/PC speakers with dollops of cool style, the Listens offer the kind of potent, full-bodied performance that you'd expect from their price tag. *HCC #232*
- 3 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**

 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, this starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. *HCC #222*
- 4 Arcam iRDAC → £400 ★★★★★**

 Arcam replaces the earlier rDAC with a model that boasts more inputs (now 192kHz capable) and completely revised innards. An excellent performer great for computer music. *HCC #228*
- 5 PSB M4U1 → £220 ★★★★★**

 These closed-back 'phones are excellent all-rounders – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too. *HCC #221*
- 6 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**

 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 7 Roku 3 Streaming Player → £100 ★★★★★**

 This step-up streamer builds upon the cute design and simplified operation of the Roku LT with welcome additions including SD card support, headphone input and 1080p video. Neat. *HCC #230*
- 8 Microsoft Xbox One → £430 ★★★★★**

 Not as graphically potent as the PS4 (below) but the new Xbox lives up to its billing as a home entertainment hub – voice control and multi-tasking tricks prove very useful. *HCC #230*
- 9 One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★★**

 A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys. *HCC #220*
- 10 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**

 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. Yet it has a few foibles. Wanna play 3D BDs? You'll be disappointed. *HCC #229*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Third Season**

More fantastic fantasy TV delivered on Blu-ray – as with previous seasons, the AV quality here ensures the show's big-budget bombast shines through.

★★★★★

**The Walking Dead: The Complete Third Season**

The best series of zombie TV yet, this third run shuffles onto Blu-ray with authentic 1.78:1 HD imagery and atmospheric and spine-tingling DTS-HD MA sonics. Roll on S4.

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**James Dean: Ultimate Collector's Edition**

Warner Home Video has given *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant* 4K restorations from their original camera negatives. The result is that these 1950s classics look fab.

★★★★★

**Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series**

Audio commentaries, short episode prequels and featurettes are among the extras on this set collecting 15 episodes of TARDIS-based fun. The 1080i transfers impress, too.

★★★★★

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Code IRBKITS **£48.00**



Wireless Full HD + 3D HDMI

Replace your HDMI cable wirelessly and locate your HDTV or projector wherever you want

Code GV821 **£265.00**



IP Mains Switch

IP controllable mains power switch with two independent mains outlets.

Code IPMSW1 **£119.99**



HDMI to Component and VGA Video Converter

Takes in HDMI and gives out Component Video (Y-Pb-Pr) or VGA plus stereo audio. Allows you to view on older component TVs or projectors and VGA displays that do not have an HDMI input.

Code HDMI VGAP **£59.99**



HDMI Distribution Amplifiers

These Coosis HDMI Distribution amplifiers are compact devices that give multiple simultaneous HDMI outputs from one HDMI input.

Code HDC12 1 HDMI input to 2 HDMI outputs **£34.99**

Code HDC14 1 HDMI input to 4 HDMI outputs **£74.99**

Code HDC18 1 HDMI input to 8 HDMI outputs **£114.99**



VGA to HDMI

Takes in VGA and analogue stereo audio and converts to an HDMI output.

Code VGAHDMIP **£49.99**



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Starscape

Fibre Optic & LED Lighting



Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions, not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

However, we're also proud of the friendly, no-jargon service that we offer DIY home cinema enthusiasts. Our fibre optic and LED lighting can add that finishing touch to your room, and you'll find it surprisingly affordable, and easy to install. Creative use of lighting can make all the difference between just a room with a large TV/projector and a truly distinctive and personal space.



To learn how fibre optic and LED lighting can feature in your project phone 01289 332900 and speak to John or Peter, or e-mail info@starscape.co.uk. See the website for step-by-step home cinema lighting project reports.



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TOP 5 PVRs


Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★


Sky+HD, £subscription

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★


Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★


Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★


Samsung BD-F8500, £300

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS


Yamaha YSP-3300, £900

A slender soundbar/sub duo that offers a very effective virtual surround performance courtesy of Yamaha's Beam driver tech. Connections include four HDMI inputs – but there's no Bluetooth here

★★★★★


Canton DM 50, £400

This sturdily built soundbase speaker may lack HDMI inputs but makes up for it with Bluetooth streaming and a full-bodied 2.1-channel performance. Movies and music benefit from clarity and power

★★★★★


Monitor Audio ASB-2, £1,000

This premium proposition marries Monitor Audio's C-CAM drivers with AirPlay and DLNA music streaming. Performance is exemplary – powerful and polished in equal measure

★★★★★


Philips HTL9100, £600

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound

★★★★★


Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS


Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★


Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★


Harman/Kardon BDS470, £650

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★


LG BH8220B, £650

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★


Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

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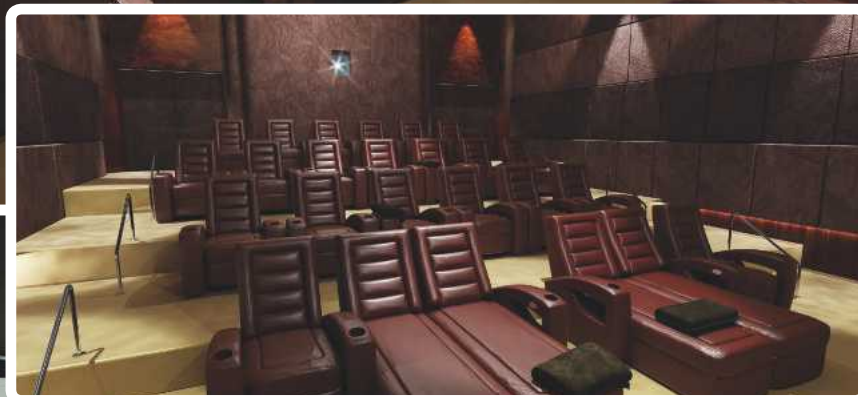
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Panasonic 2014 How the Japanese TV giant is preparing for life beyond plasma
47 Ronin SFX secrets of the martial arts epic
The truth about colour! Know your RGB from your xvYCC

→ ON TEST

Samsung 65HU8500 4K TV **Optoma HD91 LED projector** **Pioneer VSX-S510 AV receiver** **Tannoy Mercury Vi 5.1 speakers** **T+A Caruso Blu disc player** **Mede8er media player** **PLUS** News, software, opinion, installs and more!

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Editor Home Cinema Choice - Mark Craven



POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson always knew the importance of calibrating his AV system. Now he knows that it's equally important to do it regularly, as it's very easy to get used to poor performance

HAVE YOU EVER had that difficult moment when a friend proudly demonstrates their system for your opinion? They have an uncalibrated TV with brightness like the surface of the sun, and a cheapo home cinema package with all the dynamics of a kitchen radio, and are really, really happy with the performance. You stand there debating whether to tell him gently, run away, or close your eyes and stuff their pet gerbils in your ears.

The fact is it's easy to get lulled into a false sense of 'peak AV performance' and most non-enthusiasts are very happy with their setup. Doubly so if they are bombarded with marketing ordinance to make them assume their purchase is at the top of its game in the first place.

Given that I have poured most of my disposable income into home cinema for the last 20 years, I think I am 'there' performance-wise. Got it sussed. Picture stunning. Sound awesome. No worries. That said, as I trooped around this year's Sound & Vision: The Bristol Show, dodging hi-fi beardies and Frank Zappa fans, I did see a couple of projector pictures that were really quite stunning. There were some fine-sounding speakers, too. Back at home, was my projector that good? Did my sound system have that sort of clarity and articulation?

A few days later, watching a movie, I decided: yes it did. Awesome, everything peachy. Then doubt began to creep in. I found myself scrutinising the performance ever so closely. Was it my imagination or are my flesh tones a bit ruddier that they should be? In darker scenes, shouldn't there be more detail? **Has Bruce Willis always sounded just a little bit like Joe Pesquale?**

Diving into the projector menus, I discovered all the calibration settings had flat-lined to zero and the plethora of dodgy picture enhancement modes had

defaulted to 'on'. The projector had done a full factory reset. The only possible time I could imagine that happened was when I had a mains spike that tripped out half the house in the storms before Christmas. I had been watching the projector in its 'straight out of the box' setup for 10 weeks. Oops.

Playing a sweep tone through the centre channel speaker, Bruce's issue was quickly identified. The LF of the bi-amped centre speaker was several dB quieter than the HF. I checked cables, twiddled with AV processor settings, re-terminated cables and in a fit of desperation lined the amps up with magnetic north. My conclusion was a faulty speaker was to blame. I substituted a borrowed centre channel. This had the same problem. Ah. Oh. I had forgotten the power amp had a small gain knob on the back and the left channel (connected to the LF) was turned down a bit. I must have knocked that during a cleaning and dusting session. Double oops.

A lesson learned

As this sorry tale proves, performance is rather relative to what you get used to. So the amp was tweaked, the original centre speaker went back and the PJ was subjected to an evening with the pleasure of Spears & Munsil's finest calibration disc. And, lo! All was right with the world of home cinema.

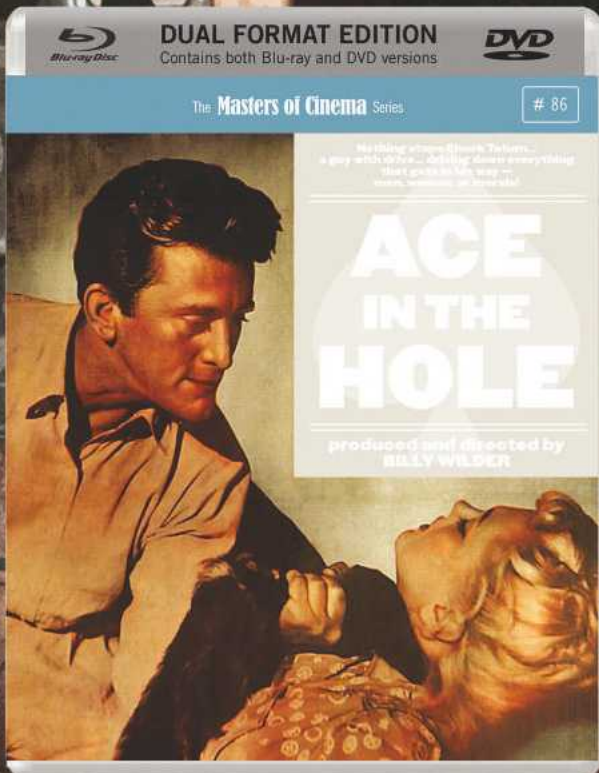
Or is it? If I can be such a muppet not to notice the projector was out of calibration, what else could be amiss? So I am yet again heading towards a long weekend of maintenance and fine-tuning. A complete dismantling of the system, a new mains ring and extra sockets, and a full refit and re-calibration of every component. Only then will I be satisfied and gerbils the world over will be safe ■

*Are you happy with your AV system's performance?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Most of the time we saw **Richard Stevenson** do any trooping at Sound & Vision: The Bristol Show, it was in the direction of the hotel bar




**Nothing stops Chuck Tatum...
a guy with drive... driving down everything
that gets in his way —
men, women, or morals!**



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** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R.